

*I can't... see.... Don't... come... near me....*

CHAPTER 1  
A Prayer Yonder

Good fortune, then,  
To make me blest, or cursed 'st among men!  
-*The Merchant of Venice* Act II Scene I

*Shion.*

She tried to call to him. But her voice would not come out. Her tongue would not move. Her arms and legs were heavy as if they had been bound in shackles, and she could not get them free. Shion didn't turn around. His back, clad in a white shirt, moved further and further away. Around them was darkness. An inky black darkness spread out all around. There was not even the smallest ray of light.

*Shion, wait. You can't go.*

*Turn around. Come back home. Don't go any further.*

The darkness shifted. It bristled slimily and reared like something alive, and swallowed the retreating white back whole.

*Shion!*

A shriek tore through her throat. Terror turned into vicious pain as it raced through her whole body. She tried to leap into the darkness after Shion, but her body would still not move. She couldn't take a single step forward.

*Someone—someone help me. Stop him.*

"Karan."

"Ma'am!"

She heard voices. Someone was holding her hand. She was shaken lightly.

"Karan, can you hear me? Can you hear my voice?"

"Ma'am, wake up!"

The voices had strength. The darkness was brushed away from her eyes, and her vision lightened into a dim haze.

*Oh—I hear you. I do hear you.*

Karan opened her eyes. Her vision was blurry, like there was a veil being draped over it. Two hazy faces—one of a tan man and one of a girl—were peering into her face. But they were fleeting. She felt like if she blinked, they would ripple and shimmer, and disappear.

She could smell bread. Butter rolls, with ample butter kneaded into the dough. Come evening, Lost Town residents would flock to Karan's bakery for her affordable and delicious breads: labourers, after a long day's toil; hungry students; children with loose change in their fists—for these poor customers, she had set the oven to finish baking at 5 o'clock sharp. It looked like the outdated oven had functioned properly—the dozen or so butter rolls were finished and ready.

For Karan, the aroma of baking bread was the aroma of life itself. The savoury smell, now long familiar to her nose, yanked Karan energetically back into the real world.

The veil was thrown off. The outline of two faces flew clearly into her vision.

"Lili... Yoming..."

"Looks like you've come to," Yoming heaved a relieved sigh. *Thank goodness*, his lips moved. "Can you get up? You don't have to force yourself."

"Yes—I'm... I'm fine."

Yoming supported her while she raised her upper body. She had been lying on an old sofa in a corner of her workspace.

"I... went unconscious..."

"Yeah," Yoming said. "Behind the display case there, you just kind of crumpled to the ground. I was so startled. My heart's still going a mile a minute."

Yoming flashed a relieved smile. Karan tried to smile back, but her cheeks were stiff, and didn't move the way she wanted them to.

"Ma'am!" Lili threw herself at Karan and clung to her neck. Her eyes were brimming with tears. "Ma'am, you're okay, right? You're okay now?"

Lili pressed her cheek against Karan's neck. It was wet. The arms that clung to her were trembling as well. The little girl's tears were warm. They were almost hot. Normally she would gently embrace the little girl, but Karan's arms would still not move as she wanted them to. They were still heavy, and she felt like she was still clawing about in her dream.

*Shion.*

She wanted to tear her hair out. She felt like she would go insane. Right this moment, what if Shion was heading to a place where his mother's hands could never reach? What if he was descending into the depths of hell?

*If he is, if that's really happening, what am I to do? What should I...*

"Oh!" Lili gasped softly, and drew away from Karan. "They're little mousies!"

A little brown mouse was sitting on the spice shelf. Another grey one poked its furry face out from beside it.

"Hey, there's two." Lili raised two fingers. Were they siblings? The two mice blinked their very similar grape-coloured eyes, and huddled together.

One had brought her Shion's letter. But what about the other one?

"Lili, can you bring me a tiny piece of cheese from the fridge? It's in the bottommost drawer."

"Okay."

Karan extended her hand up to the mice on the shelf, gently, but with as much strength as she could. The tips of her fingers trembled. The two mice looked at each other, and busily twitched their whiskers.

*Cheep-cheep.*

One of them encouraged the other, and the encouraged one turned to face Karan. It had such small eyes, but they were eyes that showed intelligence. These mice possessed intellect. They could understand human language and emotions.

Karan reached out further. She turned her palm upwards.

*Cheep. Cheep.*

The grey one slipped forward. Without a minute of hesitation, it jumped down onto her palm. It shook its head side-to-side, and spat a small capsule out of its mouth. It was her second letter today.

"Ma'am, are you gonna give the cheese to the mousies?"

Karan nodded at Lili, and opened the capsule. It wasn't Shion's writing. But she remembered seeing it before. It was the writing that had extended a hand to Karan and pulled her up when she had been wallowing in the depths of despair, after Shion was taken away by the Security Bureau. It was the beautiful, flowing hand that showed its owner's intelligence and resilient will. She could never forget this writing.

*Reunion will come.      Nezumi*

The short sentence didn't even add up to a tenth of his last note, but Karan was able to heave a sigh of relief. A cool, soothing breeze blew through her body. The obstruction in her chest, her airway, cleared somewhat.

*Oh, I can breathe.*

It was too early to despair. She could not lose hope yet.

"Nezumi..." She found herself saying his name out loud. For an instant, she felt like someone had put an arm around her shoulders. Although she couldn't see it, she could feel strong and supple arms supporting her.

*Reunion will come. Whatever happens, I will bring Shion back to you alive. This I promise.*

She could hear a low voice whisper at her ear. She breathed deeply again.

Nezumi was there. Always, at any time, he would be by Shion's side. Her boy was not alone.

"Karan, what's that?"

Yoming was peering into Karan's hand.

"A letter."

"Letter? Do the mice deliver the post where you live?"

"They do," she smiled. "And it's handwritten, too. Isn't it so much more delightful than electronic mail?"

Now she could smile. Yoming and Lili looked at each other, and the corners of their mouths turned up as well. Lili, who was breaking the cheese and feeding it to the two mice, came up to Karan and buried her cheek into Karan's bosom. This time, Karan could finally put her arms around her properly.

"I was scared," Lili mumbled tearfully. "I was scared that... you wouldn't move at all anymore... like Daddy... I was scared. Really scared."

"Daddy? Did something happen to your Daddy, Lili?"

"My Daddy before. My real Daddy."

"What?"

Yoming shook his head slightly.

"Lili's current father is Renka's second husband—she remarried."

"So Getsuyaku-san is..." Karan trailed off. "—I see."

She conjured to mind the long, thin face with drooping eyebrows. Now that Yoming had

mentioned it, she realized he and Lili were not alike at all in facial structure or body type. But she never felt anything strange about seeing them walking hand-in-hand, or coming to buy bread together. They were a happy family, father and daughter who truly got along. After Shion had disappeared, she felt a twinge of pain in her heart at times when she saw Getsuyaku and Lili together. She was both saddened and envious.

"Then Lili's father..."

"He passed away a few years back."

"A little before you moved in here, ma'am," Lili chimed in. "But you know, I love my new Daddy too. He's really funny. He always makes me laugh."

Lili lifted her chin, and a grin spread across her face. It was a bright smile of relief as she confirmed that Karan could speak properly, feeble though it was.

"I never knew. Renka never mentioned anything."

"She probably didn't want to," Yoming said. "They're painful memories for her."

The words had probably slipped without him knowing. Yoming gave a deep sigh. Lili began to speak.

"One day when we were eating together, Daddy stopped moving. He said, 'I can't breathe' and fell out of his chair. And I don't know why, but he stopped moving after that."

Lili's body began to shake, as memories of her younger days began to come back to her. Karan slid her gaze to Yoming. She questioned him with her eyes.

*What is this about?*

"Lili's father—died, before her eyes," Yoming said hesitantly, casting his eyelashes down. "No," he then said momentarily. "He was murdered."

"Murdered!"

The frightful word overlapped with the image of Shion's retreating back. Karan found herself clenching her fists so hard that her nails were digging into her palms.

"Lili's father—his name was Suifu—was a construction worker, and a giant of a man who was proud of his strength, and rightly too," Yoming said.

"Mommy says he was really kind, strong, and cool. He was really in love with Mommy, right?"

Yoming smiled wryly.

"I think Renka's prettying it up a bit too much, even for a story to tell her daughter. Suifu was a big drinker and a loose spender, so they were always getting into fights. But, well, he was a nice guy, and worked hard for his family. He was a boisterous one, and liked to sing. When he'd get drunk, he'd always sing in that booming voice. Yeah," he nodded. "He was a good guy. He certainly did love his family very much."

"But he was... killed?"

"Indirectly."

"Indirectly..." Karan repeated. "Yoming, will you explain in a way I can understand?"

Yoming drew up a battered chair, and sat down. With his right hand, he gently stroked Lili's hair. It was a gesture that showed how much Yoming cared for and cherished his niece.

"Explain so you understand, huh... if only it was as easy as that. There are so many things I still don't know, that it's hard to even tell in proper sequence."

Yoming always spoke in a muddled way, and often ended his sentences awkwardly. But

nevertheless, he groped for the right words, and began to weave the story in fragments.

"Suifu, back then, was involved in the construction of a certain building. He was a construction worker."

"A certain building..."

"Yeah. But we still don't know what building it was. I heard even Suifu didn't have an idea what it was. He used to be taken to the construction site in a windowless van—he couldn't see anything outside."

"Then to silence him—?"

"No, Karan, that couldn't be it. Suifu took his assigned job seriously, but he wasn't interested at all in what he was building. He didn't care which part of the city this building was in, or what it was going to be used for. Even if he was interested, it wasn't a kind of secret that a construction worker could sniff out. It was put under skilful concealment. Right after Suifu died, I did some footwork of my own trying to find out where this brother-in-law of mine used to work, but to no avail. Open disclosure doesn't exist in a city like this. If the authorities wanted it concealed, there would be nothing we citizens could do against it, anyway. There shouldn't have been any need to go as far to kill Suifu to hide a secret."

"Then... what did he die of?"

"Outwardly they're saying it was a heart attack. But I can't bring myself to believe that Suifu could have had one. It's as likely as a duck drowning in a pond."

"So it must mean there's something else to it."

"Yeah..." Yoming sealed his lips gravely, and cast his gaze around the room.

"It's alright," Karan reassured. "We're not being tapped."

"Is that so." Yoming paused. "I'm sorry," he said abruptly, "being all furtive like this. It's shameful."

"No, not at all."

Were they really free from tapping devices? Frankly, Karan wasn't completely sure. The authorities possessed enormous power. They could do anything if they wished to. It should be no large feat for them to tap all citizens' conversations and manage that information.

But even so.

Karan grasped the memo tightly in her hand.

She would accomplish nothing if she kept shrinking back from fear. *Instead of being afraid, sealing my lips, plugging my ears—let me speak, let me listen.* She would say it out loud; she would tilt an ear to listen. To her it seemed like it was the only option left.

Karan leaned forward determinedly to the man and his roundabout words.

"And this 'something else' that you were talking about?"

Yoming blinked just once. Then, he stared straight into Karan's eyes.

"All of this is speculation. But if I tell you, I might end up loading you down with a burden."

"I want to hear about it, and this is from my own will."

She tried spurring Yoming on.

"You went and you investigated your own side of the truth. You said you barely know anything, but knowing you, you've probably at least gotten a clue. You've grasped *something*, haven't you? A hint—it might be thinner than a thread, but something to lead you to the truth?"

"You've expected too much from me," Yoming said heavily. "I didn't have the power, courage, or method to do any of that... but I can say that the pay that Suifu received while he was working at that site was quite, quite high. I heard it was double that of how much he usually gets. Renka was surprised when she heard Suifu was getting 'special danger compensation'. It's hard to imagine a construction site with danger risk in a place like No. 6."

"Special danger compensation..." Karan pondered. "For tearing something down, or blowing it up..."

"Or handling chemicals."

"Chemicals—you mean poison?"

"Or the equivalent. Something unknown: something even the scientists of No. 6 wouldn't know the proper method of handling."

"I can't imagine anything that would fit."

"It's hard to. There's just not enough information."

"But Lili's father wasn't the only one working at the site, was he?" Karan persisted. "Wouldn't we be able to find out more if we asked those other people too?"

"That's the thing; I can't find any of them."

"You can't find them?"

"Yeah. They're missing—or maybe they didn't exist in the first place. In other words, there were no other humans involved in the construction other than Suifu."

"No other humans... oh, then do you mean robots—"

"Yes. Robots. They were using construction robots."

Karan lifted her face, and gazed at the ceiling without really seeing it. Shion used to operate robots, too. They were cleaning robots for the park.

"They're really cute, but functionality-wise they've still got some ways to go. Like just the other day: a lady had her hat blown away by the wind, and the robot picked it up, which was perfectly fine. But the robot couldn't control its grip, and ended up squashing the hat. The lady was furious, can you imagine? So I think humans are still better with small and delicate tasks. Human fingers are really amazing, you know."

And he would wiggle his fingers lightly...

Karan screwed her eyes shut to forcefully scatter the memories of her son from her mind. She spoke in the calmest voice she could muster.

"Lili's father must have been doing a job that robots couldn't do."

"Probably," Yoming conceded. "But Suifu wasn't a technician. He didn't have any special technical skill. I mean, being the serious guy he is deep-down, I'm sure he would have done a thorough job with anything that was given to him, but... I can't imagine what he could have been doing amongst those robots."

"Fingertips?"

"Huh?"

"The difference between humans and task robots."

Shion's fingertips fluttered in her memories. They were deft fingertips. They always skilfully performed the delicate work she asked him to do. Once in a while, she even found herself gazing in admiration at their dexterity.

*You know mom, human fingers are really amazing.*

"Robots might be more useful for things like tearing down walls, or carrying heavy things, but with smaller tasks that require more care... for example, let's see... using small tiles to make a complicated pattern on the wall, or engraving letters into a pillar... robots still can't do that, right? It's the same with bread. If you want to make bread that tastes the same and looks the same, a machine would be enough. But celebration cakes, for example—where it's important for them to look nice, and to match that person's taste—you'd have to make them by hand if you wanted something good."

"But Suifu couldn't bake bread or cakes like you can. He didn't have the skill to make patterns with tiles, or engrave lettering. He really couldn't do anything special... or at least, I don't think so."

"How about carrying things?"

"Carrying things?"

"Yes, important things... like fragile items, or soft things... things that have to keep their shape, like a hat. Human hands would be more suited for things like that."

"You're right. That might be it. Maybe Suifu was carrying some highly-dangerous something-or-other, that couldn't be left to robots. But... even if that was true, I have no idea what that might be, or how it could relate to those sudden deaths. No matter how much I rack my brains, I can never get out of the range of speculation. In the end, with nothing to work with, we can only keep asking the same questions that will never have answers. We don't know anything for sure... all we know is that Suifu was involved in city construction work, and that he died. That's it. Right, Karan?"

Yoming's tone of voice grew more leaden by the second, and dropped so low she could barely hear him.

"This city devours people ruthlessly," Yoming growled. "Sometimes I can't help but think so. It devours people that have fallen out of the boundaries of the city's values; people whom they've deemed inferior to their values; people who have objected against their values. They devour them head-first, ripping them, stewing the bits, until they throw them away."

"Mm..." Karan answered vaguely.

"So in the end, a place like this, Lost Town, is like a cesspit for the city: it's a gathering-place for people who have fallen out of the city's criteria of value, inferior humans. No, they probably deliberately made it this kind of gathering-place. It's a warehouse of disposable people."

Karan felt an onset of shivers at Yoming's heavy, low voice, as well as the words that were coming out of his mouth. She stole a glance at Lili. Apparently weary of the adults' conversation, the little girl had moved some paces away to play with the two mice. The brown and grey mice were in Lili's lap, stuffing their cheeks with morsels of cheese. Whether human or some other animal, small beings were always adorable. It was the adult's job to protect these small and fragile bodies and minds, with whatever it took.

That was what Karan believed. She didn't want to thrust the terror of reality on Lili, still so young. Yes, one could not be blinded. One must not be tricked. One had to be able see through the deceit and find real truth. But this hardened will was something to be born by adults who were old enough to withstand 'knowing'. Lili was still much too young.

"Lili."

The little girl turned towards Karan's voice with her large, black eyes.

"I don't think the cheese is enough to make those little mousies full. I think there's a butter roll from yesterday left in a corner of the display case. Will you give them half each?"

"You can give bread to mouseys?"

"Yes. Will you give it to them as a reward? And could I ask you to watch the store, too? If a customer comes in, I want you to give them a nice greeting, and say, 'welcome!'. I promise I'll treat you to freshly-baked butter rolls later."

"Yay! You know, I've always wanted to do a baker's job."

The mice were now perched on Lili's shoulder, evidently having become close friends with her. They were a pair of smart mice: they could tell which humans were dangerous, and which ones could be trusted.

"Ma'am, you know what?" Lili stood on her toes and brought her lips to Karan's ear. "I'm gonna tell you a secret."

"Alright, what is it?"

"Mommy's gonna have a baby. I'm going to be a big sister."

"Oh my, Renka? That's fantastic. When?"

"When it gets warm, and lots of flowers start to bloom."

Yoming gave an exasperated smile.

"Hey, Lili, are you sure it was okay to just reveal Mommy's secret like that?"

"Ma'am's allowed to know."

"I'm so glad," Karan said warmly. "Thank you for telling me. When the baby is born, we'll have to celebrate with a giant cake. Alright, Lili, you'll watch the store for me, right?"

"Yeah. I say 'welcome!' right? 'Welcome!'" With the mice sitting on her shoulder, Lili left the room and made for the bakery counter. Yoming gave yet another sigh.

"Right. I guess it's something we wouldn't want Lili to hear."

"Of course. To hear that your own father was treated like an object, and that he lost his life as a result... even if she were to find out eventually, right now is too early."

Yoming slowly lifted his gaze from the exit into which Lili had disappeared, and rested it back on Karan.

"Treated like an object—yes, Suifu was given the same treatment as the robots. He wouldn't have been told how risky that job was. They must have glossed it over with something vague, and dangled high wages under his nose. Suifu wanted money. It was still only a short time after he'd been fired from his former workplace for getting into a disagreement with a colleague. If it was to support his family, he would have been prepared to risk a few things to get a job. The authorities researched all of that, of course, and chose Suifu for that reason. After all, they've got complete access to citizen information. It was probably a piece of cake for them to pick a suitable candidate. They needed someone to handle a job with unknown dangers; someone who was used to heavy lifting; someone who was responsible, and worked silently and efficiently. A man without curiosity, inquisitiveness, or a sense of suspicion. Someone who wouldn't mind risking danger for money—Suifu was probably the perfect choice."

"So that's why his job and his sudden death must be related somehow. You're sure of that."

"Yeah. I don't know how in the world they *could* be related, but I certainly believe they're



connected to each other. Ask me why I think so, and I'd say—"

"You'd say?"

"The ambulance. Suifu collapsed, and Renka, naturally, called the ambulance. But she told me it came unusually quickly. She said it wasn't even three minutes after she'd phoned them."

An ambulance arriving within three minutes—this was an extremely rare occurrence in Lost Town; no, one could even say it was nonexistent.

The Holy City of No. 6 was an urban society built upon a rigid hierarchy. With the mayor and his city policies at the apex, only a handful of "chosen ones" reigned. They were named "elites", and lived in the luxury residences of Chronos in a special district, blessed with an undisturbed, excessive, and exceedingly comfortable life. The regular citizens below them, although far from having a life like one in Chronos, lived their daily lives supported by highly-developed medical and scientific technologies, in happiness—or in what they were made to think of as happiness. People like Karan who lived in Lost Town, even farther from "elite", were not insured of any of the city's services and aid that were normally available to regular citizens. They were treated like sub-citizens. To borrow Yoming's words, Lost Town was like a warehouse for disposable humans.

Emergency medical care was almost unattainable in Lost Town. Karan remembered hearing that the number of ambulances and medical clinics were less than a tenth of Chronos. This was regardless of the fact that Lost Town had many more injured and ill patients than Chronos.

An ambulance had arrived in less than three minutes. What was the meaning behind this almost miraculous occurrence?

"Do you mean that Lili's father was being placed under surveillance, so that they could deal with it quickly if anything out-of-the-ordinary happened?"

"It was probably Level 3 surveillance. Suifu started convulsing at the dinner table, but by the time the ambulance arrived, he was already not moving. I don't know whether he was still alive at this point, or if he was already a corpse, because people from the Health and Hygiene Bureau carried him off. Renka tried to accompany him in the ambulance, but she was refused. They ordered her to stay at home."

"And after that, Lili's father..."

"Two hours later, he came back as a cold body. A doctor that was sent over by the Health and Hygiene Bureau explained that it was a heart attack, but of course we could never believe that. I was at the scene too, because I'd rushed over after getting Renka's call. I begged him to explain in more detail, but it didn't do any good. The only thing that happened was Suifu's ID card getting exchanged for a Confirmation of Death card to permit his funeral."

"I see... so that was what happened."

She knew she was giving a rather unthoughtful answer. But she had no idea what kind of answer she could have given to Yoming's words—what answer she ought to have given. It wasn't something she could just let in one ear and out the other. But of course, easy words of consolation and condolence were equally as inappropriate. Then what would she say, and how? She couldn't help but hesitate. Her hesitation turned to unease, and faintly took on a tinge of fear. Yoming's words further coloured this fear deeply.

"When the doctor was leaving, what do you think he said to Renka? 'This patient passed away almost without any pain at all,' he said. And true, Suifu's dead face was peaceful. He was smiling like he was having some nice dream. But Renka and Lili saw how his face was twisted in pain before he collapsed. How could they ever believe that he'd died a peaceful death?"

"So you're saying the Lili's father's dead face was *made* to look peaceful by some special method..." Karan swallowed hard. Her own parents included, all of the bodies that Karan had ever seen were always smiling peacefully. Their faces were graced with smiles that made them look like they had never experienced a single pain or hardship while they were alive. Every dead face was beautiful. That was how she thought they were supposed to be—that in No. 6, where palliative care was highly developed, everyone was promised a calm and painless death.

It was a lie. It was all artificial. Here, even human deaths were covered up and modified. All the circumstances and truths that clung to each and every human death were scrubbed clean like tanned hide, levelled, fixed up, and tucked away as a "peaceful death".

*We're living in a world that is more disturbing than I could ever fathom. And what if this disturbing nature was far beyond what my pallid imagination could visualize...?*

"Whatever the case, Suifu's death is still shrouded in mystery. Renka's remarried and managing to get on with her life. I'm—as you can probably see—living day-to-day as an information-broker. I've been so caught up with other tasks that a lot of times, I forget about Suifu. And I say *damnit* to myself every time. Those are my days: gnashing my teeth, reminding myself that I can't let myself forget about Suifu, and of course my wife and son."

"There would be no way you would forget it," Karan reassured him, "if Lili's father and your wife and son have been murdered by this city. You wouldn't be able to, would you?"

"No. And that's the only thing I can do now: remember. Keep remembering. I'll never forget all the people that were taken from me. But sometimes I get a nasty chill when I think—what if the authorities catch me? And I wonder, if they ever erased my memory..."

Yoming peered closely at Karan's face. Her eyes were shadowed. It looked as if despair had been poured into her eyes, and her gaze was swimming in it.

"What do you mean, erase your memory?" she asked.

"Lobotomy. Cutting into my brain with a scalpel, and taking my memories and thinking ability from me."

"Yoming, you're—" *You're letting your thoughts run away with you. You're being delusional.*

She couldn't say the rest of her words. Lobotomy—maybe it was possible. After Shion disappeared, the Holy City shed mask after mask of artifice, right before her eyes. Although she had only seen a small portion, what Karan saw of No. 6 was not a Holy City; it was a remorseless authoritarian city-state.

*This city is trying to dominate people.*

They wanted to dominate without exception the minds, the bodies, of everyone who lived in the city. They wanted to put their thoughts, lives, and fates under relentless scrutiny, and dominate them.

Yes, it was like Yoming said. No. 6 devoured people. They tore through any attempt to remain human, any soul, or will to resist, any wish, and wolfed it all down. It was no Holy City. It was a rearing monster, gone mad with desire for domination.

Had no one realized? Was everyone too fooled by their appearance of a satisfactory and

comfortable lifestyle to even notice the monstrous figure? What stupidity...

Karan shook her head vigorously. These were not simply someone else's problems. They were most certainly not.

"Karan, are you starting to feel ill again?" Yoming said with concern. "You just fainted after all—you should rest a little. I'm sorry for bringing up something like this."

Yoming looked sincerely apologetic. Karan shook her head firmly again.

"No, that's not it. I was just—remembering something."

"Hm? What?"

"Lili's asked me that before. Whether we're really happy or not."

Lili had once asked her.

"We're happy, right?"

It was quite a while back. It was after Karan had gone through the struggle to open her bakery, and it was finally starting to operate smoothly. Karan had murmured, *hmm, well, I guess*, and cocked her head to the side. She had been able to make baking, which she liked, into her life's work. It wasn't much to live on, but at least she had an idea now of how she and her son could make a living. Even after being revoked of all their special privileges and being exiled from Chronos, they had been able to acquire a stable life. It was during that time. Back then she had no way of knowing that in a few years, a cruel separation from Shion would be waiting for her. So in truth, if she was asked *are you happy*, she could very well have nodded and said, *why yes, I guess I am*. Karan had indeed not thought of herself as unhappy at that time.

Karan's fall from Chronos to Lost Town didn't cause her much grief or suffering. On the contrary, she was enjoying the lightness of her load, having cast off her life insured of all amenities like food, clothing, and shelter. Despite having to deal with treatment as a sub-citizen, she was still within the walls of No. 6 as a resident of Lost Town. As long as she didn't desire anything extravagant, she had nothing lacking in her life. Clean water and food were easily accessible. Although understaffed, there were medical clinics for Lost Town residents where she could go to get examined. She had an abode that could withstand wind and rain. She was free from any fears of malnutrition, starvation, hypothermia, or genocide. Shion was by her side, and she had customers who came to her bakery to buy her bread.

She was not unhappy at all.

She had not been able to agree promptly to Lili's question of whether they were happy, not because of her own situation or state-of-mind, but because of a shadow that had flitted across Lili's eyes. Perhaps it was uncertainty. Perhaps Lili was uncertain, her emotions so unsettled, that she had clung to the bakery madam, whom she loved and trusted.

"It's hard to say whether we're happy or not, in one word. There's a lot of times where we're happy and we're not, when we're joyful or sad. Lots of different feelings."

"Right?" Lili squeezed her fingers. "We have lots of different feelings, right?"

"Right. You feel like that too, don't you Lili? Even during a single day, sometimes you feel happy, and sometimes unhappy, right?"

"Yeah, I do. When I'm really hungry, and I get to eat your muffins, ma'am, I feel happy. But when Mommy gets mad at me or when I get into a fight with my friend and we can't say sorry and make up, I feel sad. But..."

"Hm?"

"But at school, the teacher says that everyone who lives in No. 6 is happy. He says there's no one in No. 6 that's unhappy."

"You learned this in class?"

"Yeah. When the principal was saying his speech. He said outside of No. 6, the world is really tough and unhappy. And people die there every day. They die because they don't have enough to eat, or because they fight and hurt each other. He said people are like beasts, and they live like beasts too. And compared to those people, No. 6 is heaven, and everyone's happy."

By beast-like people, he probably meant the residents of the West Block. It was such a scornful way to talk about people. To think that someone involved in the education of children would call another human a beast....

Karan knitted her brow. She crouched down, and looked Lili in the eye.

"But you didn't think so, Lili?"

"Hmm," Lili thought aloud. "I just felt kinda weird. Like this wiggly feeling in my stomach. Because—because you know... Mommy sometimes makes a sad face because she's tired from work, or because we don't have money. And Grandpa Saiton next door always looks painful because his back hurts. So when he said everyone's happy, it just felt weird..."

"And you didn't tell the principal this?"

Lili widened her eyes, shook her head vehemently.

"If I said that, the principal would be really angry at me. Sometimes you get called to the office and they hit you with a whip."

"My goodness, with a whip! That's terrible..."

"If you live in No. 6 and you don't think you're happy, it means you're a bad kid. So they say, of course we should get whipped."

"*Certainly not!*" Karan found herself saying shrilly. She placed a hand on Lili's shoulder. "Lili, that's certainly not true. Not true at all."

"Ma'am..."

Her heart grew restless. She could hear its fitful rustlings. She knew she had to tell this young girl in front of her something important, but she could not put it well into words. She felt frustrated at herself.

"Lili, you're still a child, and..." She stopped. "No, even adults are allowed to have all sorts of different thoughts. It's just not right if everyone thinks and feels exactly the same, right? And—and—"

*There are unhappy people in No. 6, too. Probably a lot more than I think.*

It was something Karan knew first-hand. She had transferred from Chronos, a place of chosen citizens, to Lost Town, a residence for sub-citizens. She didn't think of that as any tragic fate, but she had definitely seen with her eyes and experienced with her body the apex, as well as the bottom, of the city-state of No. 6.

Indeed, there were unhappy people not only in Lost Town, but even in Chronos—a place that was known far and wide as the ideal neighbourhood. Yes, there were unhappy people, and many of them. But no one in that area ever said 'I'm unhappy' out loud. Chronos had not a single person who lamented difficulties with their household income, or those who complained of physical ailments like Saiton. All residents were promised a high and stable income, and they were in a position that granted them access to the latest, most developed

medical treatments at any hour of the day. But yet there were still unhappy people.

"Whatever shall I do tomorrow?" she had heard someone mutter once.

She was an elderly lady who lived next door. However, "next-door" in terms of Chronos was quite a distance because of the spacious yards attached to each house. Periodically, gardeners from the city would come to maintain the gardens (and also check up on and maintain the security systems in the yard, which Karan didn't find out until much later), so unlike Lost Town, where only a single wall separated one household from the other, Karan wasn't accustomed to seeing her neighbours in person or having conversations with them.

But Karan was on unusually good terms with this woman of over seventy, and once in a while she would be invited over for tea. The woman's husband, daughter, and grandchildren were all acknowledged as the highest elites like Shion, and she was provided for and insured with extremely favourable circumstances even compared to other residents of Chronos. But despite that, she was neither arrogant nor condescending, and often looked out for and lent a helping hand to Karan, who was raising her son all by herself.

On that day, it was the same. On a sunny and temperate afternoon one day in late autumn, the woman had invited Karan over for tea.

Smelling the fragrant aroma of black tea poured from the teapot, Karan had been about to give an appreciative *mmm* when the woman had mumbled those words. Her voice was dry and brittle, like the foliage that danced on the streets. It was dry, but heavy and gloomy.

"Whatever shall I do tomorrow?"

Karan slowly raised her gaze from the rose-patterned teacup, and stared at the elegant, composed profile of the woman who had just spoken. The words had reached Karan's ears, no problem. But the tone of her voice clashed so much with the beautiful scenery, the lavish mansion, and the fragrant tea, that she couldn't help but ask her to repeat.

"What was that?"

The elderly woman slowly let her gaze wander. Behind her ruby-studded spectacles (almost solely a fashion item), her two eyes, set in the wrinkles of her skin, blinked.

"I... have no idea what I would like to do tomorrow."

"Do you mean you've got nothing to do?"

"I don't know... what I want to do, Karan-san." Tears welled up in the rims of her eyes.

"You don't know...?"

"There's nothing. It's just empty. And it makes me so afraid. I especially despise mornings. They're utterly horrible. When I think that it's the start of another empty day, I feel so terrified, so..."

Karan, who had still been young, was perturbed by the elderly woman's tearful face and her mumbled words. As if to prove that she wasn't acting, the woman's shawl-clad shoulders were trembling.

"Ah—but—" Karan stammered. "As long as you're willing, I should think you'd be able to do anything you like. So many things..."

"Do you think so? I just have a feeling that it's going to be one empty day after another until I die.... When I think about how I'll die without having been able to do anything, I feel more fearful than painful."

Karan rose out of her seat, and shook her head almost automatically.

"That's not true. Because, look—the decor of this room, or the way you arrange tea—it's all so nice, and you're so good at it."

The elderly woman responded to Karan's awkward compliments with a serene smile.

"You're a kind soul, Karan-san. But... well, someday I suppose you'll have a taste of the same fear I feel."

The pair of eyes behind the spectacles were not laughing at all. They were like dark caverns. Karan remembered shivering. She had felt a chill in this room, filled with extravagant furniture and maintained at comfortable temperature levels all year long. The elderly woman's gaze had been so vacant, so morose, that it had made her shudder. The woman had plentiful time and wealth. Was she not in a position where all her wishes could come true? Yet here she was, lamenting: how over-privileged of her, how greedy... Karan tried to mutter those words in her mind. But both her heart and body shrank back from the morose and vacant look before her. A despair enough to petrify someone was living behind those spectacles, emitting a dull light. Karan drained her tea, and left hastily. She remembered clearly how the dishes had clinked as she replaced her cup on its saucer with trembling fingers.

Then not long after, on the edge of the changing seasons, the elderly woman suddenly passed away. In her coffin and surrounded by the white lilies which she always said she loved, the elderly woman with her eyes closed had the same glowing skin as when she was living, and her face was graced with a gentle smile. Karan felt like if she called her name, the woman would answer.

"I've lived a very happy life. I'm thankful for everything about No. 6."

Those were her last words, according to the woman's daughter, who worked at the Central Administration Bureau.

I've lived a very happy life. I'm thankful for everything about No. 6.

"Your mother said this? Really?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't she? My mother lived a life lacking in nothing. Wouldn't anyone think the same?"

"Well... I was just wondering if you yourself were just under the impression that..."

"I?"

"Yes," Karan had said. "Have you ever thought that your mother may have been unhappy?"

The daughter furrowed her brow, and a clear look of distaste swam in her eyes. She gazed at Karan as if she were looking at a hideous beast, and took half a step backwards.

"It's simply impossible that my mother could have been unhappy," she snapped. "She has never spent a single day in that kind of state. Wouldn't you know from common sense? I do hope you refrain from any more rude comments."

She turned her back to Karan. Throughout the funeral, she kept her distance. That was when Karan was certain that the elderly woman had been unhappy. She had been struggling with her unhappiness that came from being required to be happy—a life in which she was not allowed to be sad.

*Maybe...*

Her heartbeat grew more frantic. In her mind rose the woman's face, doll-like,

surrounded by white lilies.

*Maybe... she killed herself—?*

She could not say it out loud. It was simply impossible for a resident of Chronos to take her own life. It was unthinkable. They had been told it was unthinkable.

Yet... but... if unhappiness existed despite the fact that it wasn't supposed to, then couldn't there also be people who took their lives, on the brink of despair with no other choice?

Karan tightly clutched her mourning gloves as the coffin was carried out and whisked away to the cemetery.

*I should have told Lili about the elderly lady.* Unhappiness was bound to exist anywhere, whether it be Chronos or Lost Town. Karan felt like she should have thought it out together with Lili—about why people were unhappy; about how they could be happy again; what it was that they could call real happiness. She should have talked it out with the little girl—about her principal who forced happiness upon them; about the elderly woman and her morose gaze; the pain of being whipped like cattle. She should have reflected more intently on her own disquieted soul, and the little girl's agitation. But Karan had not said anything, and had done nothing.

"There are unhappy people everywhere. Just because he's the principal, I don't think he has the right to say everyone *has* to be happy," she had said, taking the most neutral way out. Just then, she had heard the flour merchant calling from the back door with his rye and wheat flour. Customers were trickling into the store.

"Thanks, ma'am. See you later."

And Lili had left. Karan pretended to be immersed in her work, and pushed Lili, memories of her fear at the funeral, her thoughts of happiness and unhappiness, clean out of her mind. She had not stopped to think. She had even forgotten. Yoming had set his jaw and committed everything to memory. But she had forgotten. She had never tried to remember.

She herself was the fool, and no one else.

*If I had been more wise, if I'd stopped to think a little harder, maybe Shion wouldn't have had to go through what he did.*

It was not only Shion. Perhaps she had burdened Safu as well, with an unfair and cruel fate. Karan chewed her lip hard.

*Shion, Safu, be alive. Please, live on. Live to come home, and let me apologize for my foolishness. Let me embrace you with these arms. Let me beg for your forgiveness.*

She pressed the scrap of paper to her bosom, and prayed.

*Reunion will come.      Nezumi*

*Nezumi, I pray to you. Please, let me see their faces again. Just one more time.*

She heard Lili's tinkling laughter. It was lighthearted and carefree, and punctuated with soft chirrups from the little mice.

*Reunion will come.*

She murmured the words on the memo. She tried to hold back the tears that were threatening to spill from her eyes. Crying wasn't going to solve anything.

*Right now, I can only send my prayers to you, whom I've yet to see.*

*Reunion will come.*



## CHAPTER 2

### Those in the Abyss

I was in it up to my neck by the time I realized the way things were going. What could I do? . . . if I refused to obey I would be killed. Or I could commit suicide. On three different occasions I thought of resigning, but it was impossible.

*-Wilhelm Keitel, The Nuremburg Interviews*

The darkness was stabbing at him. Into his retina, his eardrums, his skin, the darkness turned into needles that pricked at him viciously.

Shion sucked in a deep breath and filled his chest with air—no, darkness. By doing so, he repressed his pain and trembling. He didn't want to cower. He didn't want to let out a cry of fear. And he didn't want Nezumi, who was beside him, to hear it.

*Damnit if he ever hears me scream.*

He didn't want to expose his unsightly self to Nezumi's eyes. Shion gulped in another breath, fully conscious of the pride within him which, even in these circumstances, nagged persistently at him.

*Hn.*

Nezumi sniffed derisively inches from his ear. At the same time, the arm around Shion's waist grew tighter, pressing around his torso.

*So much for trying to act tough*, he thought he heard Nezumi whisper. But what actually reached his ears was:

"We're gonna fall."

It was a flat voice, stripped of all emotion. The emotionless voice became a frigid wind that wrapped around Shion's body. With his sense of pain, his fear, and his pride whipped away, for an instant, Shion was empty. Like a cicada shedding its skin, he became a hollow cavern that left only its outward appearance intact. He sometimes had this sensation when listening to Nezumi's voice. He didn't mind it much. In fact, it even felt refreshing. Exhilarating, even, to become empty.

When Shion tried to suck in his third breath, the floor disappeared from beneath his feet. With a heavy *thunk* it had split in two. It was like a gallows. It almost felt strange that he wasn't feeling the rope digging into his neck; hearing the sound of his cervical vertebrae cracking; feeling his body swinging limply in the air.

They were falling. Falling, straight down—at least they were supposed to be, but he couldn't grasp what was happening. He wasn't sure whether they were falling, floating, or rising. He couldn't distinguish between descent, suspension, or ascension. His senses were swallowed up by the darkness that surrounded him on all sides.

An impact hit him. He felt his whole body slam into something hard. His breath died on his lips. Whatever he had fallen on was slightly elastic, absorbing and mediating the force

enough to avoid spraining his muscles or shattering his bones.

*What did I land on—?*

He had no time to check. He was yanked forcefully.

"Roll."

He was half-shoved into a roll by Nezumi. He turned over and over, thinking of nothing, feeling no fear. His shoulder hit something hard, and he felt a pain followed by tingling. He had evidently hit a wall. As he placed his palm on the floor to push himself up, he felt a tremor—like vibrations, like strange rumbling.

"Stand up. Push yourself up against the wall."

Shion stood up, and huddled close to the wall, which was rough on the surface—probably concrete. His thoughts, willpower, and senses were half-numb. He could only barely manage to follow Nezumi's directions and move as he was told. Nezumi's body overlapped his. It was hotter than usual. But the heartbeat Shion felt against his back was not even slightly out of rhythm. Crushed with such force, Shion couldn't help but cry out.

"I can't breathe."

But his voice, which came out as a gasp, instantly dissolved in the tremendous noise from behind them. He couldn't even tell if he had heard his own voice.

"Nezumi."

He squirmed slightly.

"This—"

Never in his entire life had he heard sounds like this, voices like these.

*What is it? What are they?*

*Groaning? Rumbling? Screaming?*

A booming, thick and heavy sound roared at Shion and pressed in on him from all directions; it welled up from below, it came raining down from up top; it twisted and tangled with itself. A piercing shriek rang out. Then it rasped, cut off, and an eerie silence replaced it. But only for an instant. And again, it welled up, it rained down...

These were not sounds of a human world. They were not mere noises.

"Nezumi!"

Unable to bear it anymore, Shion wrenched his body around. The force pressing against him relaxed. The heat of Nezumi's body drew away. Shion was grabbed by his hair, and turned around. His back was pressed against the wall this time, and his hair yanked roughly.

His chin jerked up. Nezumi brought his lips to Shion's exposed ear, and whispered as if to cram the words into it.

"Look if you want to. Listen if you wish. But—"

Nezumi's fingers released his hair, and slid down his neck. They traced the red band of his scar.

"But you'll be haunted with nightmares for your whole life. Be prepared for it."

*Heh.* His short laugh, almost a mere breath, seeped into Shion's body. It was a cold laugh. It may have been condescending. Nezumi freely controlled the various ways in which he laughed. Normally, this would have sparked Shion to anger. He would have reproached Nezumi, telling him not to laugh like that.

None other than Nezumi had taught him: condemn from your heart those who scorn,

look down upon, and belittle themselves. He had taught him not only to be angry, but to hone all of the emotions he possessed, whether it was to cry, laugh, fear, reject, yearn, or love.

*Don't let them go numb. Don't let them wither. Bare your fangs at all that threatens to desecrate your humanness.*

Shion had definitely been taught. But right now, he was too overwhelmed to be angry. His emotions were falling, sifting right through him.

"Nezumi... what is this?"

"Reality." There was no hint of laughter left in his voice. "If you're gonna look, see it through 'til the end. If you're gonna listen, don't ever think of plugging your ears."

*See this through... all of this?*

Shion opened his mouth, and gasped for air.

Before his eyes was darkness. The bottom of this darkness was crawling with people. To him, it looked like they were crawling. The darkness had shades both dark and light, and his eyes, beginning to adjust, caught the darkest shades. It was a lump of overlapped people. The people who had been packed into the elevator had been smashed onto the floor, and were now squirming, crawling.

There was a blood-curdling scream. A shadow came dropping down. Someone who had been clinging onto some part of the elevator had finally spent his strength. Shion couldn't tell whether it was a man or woman. Like the roar of a beast, the scream echoed into the painted black darkness.

*Thud.*

The sound of flesh hitting flesh. Its vibrations shook not his eardrums, but his entire body, making his skin bristle.

Shion tried to remember. He tried to remember each and every one who had been shut in with the elevator with him.

There was a man. There was a woman. There was an elderly lady with mussed grey hair. There was a young girl with tanned skin. There was a wiry merchant with sunken eyes. There was a deathly pale man, a surviving member of the Disposers.

Wasn't there a mother holding her infant? Wasn't there a baby in that mother's arms? There was. There certainly was.

Wrapped in a dirty white cloth, the infant was wriggling at his mother's breast... somewhere, in this mass of people—a stench came flowing into his nostrils. It was like all of his senses, numb and dormant until now, had opened themselves out to the outside world all at once.

He began sweating profusely. His teeth refused to come together, and they chattered incessantly. The stench of blood, fecal matter, body odour, assaulted his nostrils many times more viciously than inside the cargo container. He heard people being crushed. People were being crushed under the weight of others. Although it was a sound he was hearing for the first time, he could tell it was the sound of human destruction.

"This is hell," he heard himself utter weakly.

"This is reality," a mutter answered back. "This isn't any hell. This is the reality of the world you've been living in, Shion."

A wave of nausea washed over him. Leaning heavily on the wall, Shion covered his

mouth with his hand. His stomach fluids spilled through his clenched teeth. The sweat stung in his eyes. Behind his closed eyelids, memories of his days in No. 6 floated and flashed by.

The roses of myriad colours that bloomed in the residences of Chronos; the evening sky; the powder-blue walls of his classroom; Safu waving her hand; early morning in Lost Town; the fragrance of bread that filled the house; Karan with her back to him; a little girl's footsteps—'Good morning, brother' 'Good morning, Lili'; Sampo's clunky round body; the ladies' hat that Ippo had squashed by mistake—it had been decorated with a pink flower pin—'Oh no, Ippo, that's not good—' Yamase yelling; the aroma of coffee at the café that he had stopped in with Safu; the tree branches rustling and swishing in the breeze—oh, the green—it was so vivid.

*I want to go home.*

He longed for it achingly.

*I want to go back to No. 6.*

He wanted to go back to the world within the walls. He wanted to return to his peaceful, fulfilled, quiet world. Even if it was a land ornate in falseness, he wanted to bury himself in beautiful artifice.

He gritted his teeth. He swallowed the stomach fluids inside his mouth. Shion slowly raised his heavy head. His face was drenched with perspiration.

"Nezumi..." He mustered as much strength as he could into his legs, and managed somewhat to keep himself upright. If he fell to his knees now, he would never be able to get up. He would have to dig his heels in and remain standing, even if he had to gasp for air. Nezumi would not extend a hand to him. He would not support him. If Shion was going to curl up here, if he was going to go mad, if he lost his ability to stand on his own feet—there was nothing left for him ahead.

"What should I do next?" Shion managed to speak, albeit in a raspy voice. He felt the presence in front of him give a short intake of breath.

"Can you move?"

"I will."

If he didn't, he would die. And he could not. He had not come here to die. *I'm here to save her, to live. Don't forget that. I'm going to survive this reality.* A crack ran through the cross-section of No. 6 that was drifting in the back of his eyelids. It tore apart into shreds. It shattered and disappeared, along with his desire to flee and return.

Shion extended his hand, fully prepared to have it shaken off. His fingertips felt a firm arm. He clenched his hand around it.

*Nezumi.*

*I'm not doing this to cling to your help.* He wanted it to get across.

*I'm alright. I can move. I won't squat and curl up here.*

His clenched fingers were not shaken off. The cold and brittle arm only twisted slightly. An answer came to his unspoken thoughts.

"I got it."

Almost at the same time, an orange light blinked behind Nezumi. Shion widened his eyes. His heart trembled at the tiny, marble-sized light. He felt like crying. His arm stretched forward, and his fingers clutched at thin air.

"We're gonna run, following those lights. They'll stay on for a minute and a half."

Miniature light bulbs were attached to the wall at equal intervals. They were tiny, tiny lights, barely enough to water down the darkness that lay thick upon them. But it was still light. There was still something here that was not darkness.

"Let's go."

Nezumi turned his back to him, and broke into a run. Shion also stepped out to run after him, but his foot slipped on something slimy. There was a pool of blood at his feet.

"Fucking hell," he snarled without thinking. Something that wasn't quite fear or shock was roaring in his chest, filling it up and pressing against it; and at the bottom of it, a spark was lit. Wrath. The flames of wrath circled its licking flames in a spiral, and came racing upwards.

*This is reality. Reality. Reality.*

"Goddamnit."

*I'll never forgive it. I'll never forgive this reality.*

He moved forward. He moved forward, as if kicking the puddle of blood out of the way. He desperately ran after the figure that was threatening to melt into the darkness.

*I'll survive. I'll live to destroy this reality.*

Shion's anger became heat that coursed through his body. He was filled with energy right down to his toes. Nezumi turned around. It was too dark to see the expression on his face. He swung back around, and slackened his pace a little. Even in times like these, his movements were still graceful.

The light bulbs flickered. Before them was a narrow walkway, wide enough for one person to squeeze through. The walls were bare concrete.

"Move along the wall."

"Nezumi, where does this lead?"

"The execution grounds."

"Huh?"

"Whatever's behind you and in front of you, you might as well call them execution grounds. The question is just how early or late the sentence is gonna be delivered."

A motor was humming behind them. It was an outdated model that rattled and screeched.

"Nezumi, wait. The elevator's moving again."

"Don't stop," Nezumi clicked his tongue irritably. "Keep moving forward. Don't stop walking."

"But the elevator—"

Shion's lips trembled. A cold bead of sweat rolled down his spine. Nezumi opened his mouth.

"But of course," he said stonily. "They're planning to cram all the people they've hunted in this underground chamber."

"There's gonna be more people falling?"

"They don't fall, they get dropped. Same mechanics as a gallows. The floor opens up. They fall to the bottom of the abyss. If they're lucky, they'll break their neck and leave this world painlessly for good."

"We have to tell them about this passageway."

"Who?"

"Everyone. There are still people that can move. We have to tell those people to escape here."

"And then what's gonna happen? Imagine."

"Huh...?"

"Yeah, there are people that can still move. Quite a few. But what'll happen if they all trample over each other to rush into here?"

"Well..."

A desperate mob would come swarming in. Each would jostle and shove, vying to get into a passageway that was barely wide enough for one.

What would happen?

One would fall, and others would fall on top of him. The passage would fill with more screams and groans.

"Now do you see?" Nezumi said. "Look behind you."

With a hand still on the wall, Shion turned around. Several shadows were coming this way, dragging themselves across the ground.

"Only the people who've noticed this passage and are able to break away get saved. Then they get to move to the next stage."

"Then this light—is that what it's—?"

Before he could finish his sentence, the light bulbs were extinguished. They were again plunged into inky darkness. Then, there was a sound. The air vibrated. The darkness trembled.

*How many people were crammed into that elevator? Ten, fifteen, twenty... more? But gee, you could probably only see a transport elevator like that in a museum nowadays... judging by the annoying noises, the conveyor belt is probably worn pretty thin... wait, I have a feeling there might have been an elevator like that in Lost Town. Where was it again? It made annoying noises...*

He was slapped across the cheek. The pain stung in the inside of his mouth. The empty rattling of his thoughts and perceptions returned to their normal state. But it also meant that his conscience was being pulled back into a hellish reality.

"Shion."

"Uh... yeah?"

"There won't be a next time."

*Next time, I'm leaving you behind. I'm not a saint who'll drag you along if you space out. You said you could move. Then use your own legs to escape.*

Shion wiped the sweat dripping from his chin with the back of his hand.

"Follow me. Don't get separated."

Nezumi turned his back to him again. It was so dark, and yet Shion could see the outline of his figure clearly.

*I won't leave you.*

He pressed a hand to his cheek, now hot and stinging.

*I'll never leave you. I'll sink my teeth in, and latch on no matter where you go.*

He would never lose sight of that back turned to him. He would crawl across the ground to follow him if he had to. That was the only thing in his mind. He had no room to think about No. 6, his mother, Safu, or the parasite wasps. He slapped his own cheek this time. He finally

knew first-hand that pain could be a sign of being alive. His throbbing cheek was telling him, *you can live, you can still walk.*

Apparently the lights only reached a short distance in from the entrance of the passage. It was relatively straight, and uniform in width. Just this motion of continuous walking seemed to be awakening his thought processes.

*This passage—it's man-made.*

The thought occurred to him, and Shion smiled a little. He would never have believed he could smile, but he felt the corners of his mouth tugging up. It was a bitter smile, aimed at himself.

*Of course it was man-made,* he was smiling at himself. This was the Correctional Facility. It was a building into which No. 6 imprisoned the people it deemed as criminals. Naturally, every path, every wall was man-made. The scene that Shion had witnessed in the darkness just now was the same. It wasn't hellish wreckage generated by some natural disaster. Was it not a reality that had been created by human will? Everything here was made by the human hand.

*This is the reality of the world you live in.*

He repeated Nezumi's words in a corner of his mind.

*This is the reality of the world I live in. Then who made it happen, and for what purpose?*

He tried to visualize the mayor's face. He used to see photographs of his gently-smiling face everywhere on the streets. He remembered seeing him on television. *"I don't like his ears. They're so vulgar."* That was what his mother Karan had spat, but no one ever criticized the mayor of No. 6. He had close to one-hundred percent support from the citizens.

*Him—is it him? No, but... is it possible for such a catastrophe to occur under one person's command? None of the No. 6 residents knew of this gruesome reality. Why don't they know? Why...* his thoughts creaked haltingly like the outdated elevator. They caused an unpleasant racket. But he still had to keep thinking.

Why didn't any of them know?

"Because they don't try to find out," Nezumi said, with his back still turned to him. His feet stopped, and he twisted the top half of his body to face Shion. Shion didn't know whether his eyes were getting used to it, or if Nezumi himself was deflecting the darkness, but he could see the expression on his face clearly.

"Nezumi, how did you know what I was thinking?"

He was genuinely surprised. He was so startled, he had almost lost his train of thought for a moment. Nezumi shrugged.

"I told you before, didn't I? You're easy to understand... well, parts of you are. Everything else about you just baffles me."

Nezumi's tone of voice changed. It took on a hint of softness and rang out clearly. It was a beautiful voice. Shion couldn't express what exactly it was, or how it was so beautiful. He couldn't put it into words, but he could feel the comfort slowly seep into him. It was like the comfort of lying in soft grass. He even thought he caught a glimpse of clear blue sky.

"You tired?"

"No, I can still walk."

"Hungry?"

"Huh?"

"I'm asking you if you're hungry."

"Oh, uh—no."

He tried to remember the last decent meal he had. He couldn't. But he was not hungry. He didn't feel any desire at all to put anything into his mouth. Considering what he had just slogged through, he wasn't so tough that he could still feel hunger.

"I'm not hungry at all."

"But you're running low on energy, aren't you?"

"No—"

An arm reached out to him. Nezumi's fingertips lightly touched Shion's chest in a soft and languid gesture. But Shion felt his body tipping over.

*Huh?*

He staggered, and fell down on his bottom. He had no strength in his knees.

"See?" Nezumi said. "You can barely stand. At least make sure you can assess the state you're in."

Shion was grabbed by the arm and pulled upright. A pain racked his chest. His heart was palpitating; he couldn't breathe. He broke into a sweat again.

"It's a considerable amount of trauma. Careful your heart doesn't decide to quit. I don't think there are any doctors who are attentive enough to come all the way here to examine you."

*"Throw physic to the dogs, I'll none of it."*

"What was that?"

*"Canst thou not minister to mind diseases'd;*

*Pluck from memory a rooted sorrow;*

*Raze out the written troubles of the brain;*

*And with some sweet oblivious antidote*

*Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff*

*Which weighs upon the heart?"*

Nezumi shifted uneasily. Shion could hear a deep sigh.

"Stop that, will you? The way you're butchering his lines, Macbeth is probably spinning in his grave."

"Are you saying I'm not cut out for acting?"

"Astonishing lack of talent. You probably couldn't even be an extra in a Shakespeare play. I'd advise you to give up any fruitless hopes, Shion."

"I guess I will. It's too bad, really."

"There's a good boy."

Shion was smiling. It was no ugly twist of the lips: he felt a faint but genuine smile spread across his face. At the same time, he could feel an expanse of sky spreading out over his head.

Invited along by Nezumi's voice, Shion had smiled, and seen the sky.

It was that deepest hue of blue he had seen, lying in the grassy field. The colour of the heavens was spreading across the darkness. True, this world was ridden with brutality and falseness. Indeed, it was rife with it. But that wasn't the only thing that existed. Because, look—in this world, and in people's souls, there definitely existed beautiful things like the blue of the lofty skies.



Nezumi's voice became a bubbling spring that quenched Shion's body and filled him to the brim. It was a strange voice. It melted the soul, and regenerated people to life.

"Just a little more, and we'll be able to catch a breath."

Nezumi half-twisted to look at him. Shion could see a dim light over Nezumi's shoulder. It didn't flicker like the light bulbs. It was dim, but it wasn't the kind of dimness that made one uneasy about when the light would go out.

"What's there?"

"A resting place. A temporary one."

"Resting place... we can rest there, huh."

He had felt like he could go on walking forever. He thought he would have to keep thinking like this, else they would not be able to escape.

*But we can rest.*

He exhaled. He wanted to spring forward, but his knees were weak, and walking was the best he could manage.

They emerged at the end of the passageway. Shion gulped. The scenery changed abruptly.

It was a room with white walls and a white floor. It was quite spacious. Thanks to the man-made light attached to the ceiling, the thick inky darkness had lightened into a dusky evening shade. Although hazy, Shion's vision could now capture things clearly.

Ahead of the passage, he could see a greyish door. There was no furniture or windows in the room. There was no stench of blood, or groaning voices. It was a white room, filled with nothing. There were a few shadowy figures curled up in a corner of the room. They were presumably the ones who had been crammed into the first elevator load, and had managed to survive and make their way here.

Shion buckled near the entrance. All the strength was leaving his body.

"Don't go to sleep." Nezumi knelt down beside him. "We don't have time for that."

"We're heading somewhere else again?"

"Why, it would be no fun if this was our final destination. I thought you came here to see that certain cute girl of yours?"

*Safu.*

He clenched his fists. He let his gaze dart around. Just as he thought, he was not met with the gaze he was looking for. She had been kidnapped, after all, by the Security Bureau, and imprisoned inside the Correctional Facility.

"I wonder if Safu's safe?"

"Who knows?" Nezumi answered. "But if she's alive, she's probably in a much better situation than we are. She might even be enjoying a luxurious afternoon tea. If she's alive, that is."

"Safu is alive."

"You're trying to believe that she is. Your own selfish wishes."

"You must believe it too. If you didn't, you wouldn't have come with me."

"Oh really?"

"Am I wrong?"

"Shion, why don't you rewire your brain once in a while to get out of that naive thought

pattern, hm?"

"Nezumi, but... oh—"

Shion shut his mouth. A man was staggering across his path on unsteady feet. He swayed forward, and crumpled face-first onto the floor. The man behind him tripped over the body, and also fell. Neither of them moved. However, Shion could tell that they were still breathing. Their fallen backs were still rising and falling slightly. But the man who fell first lay still moments later.

"Aren't you gonna help him?"

Shion fell silent this time in answer to Nezumi's question.

"What's wrong? Usually you'd be there in a flash, helping him up."

"I can't."

His hands and feet felt like they were tied to lead weights. Even moving a finger took a large effort. It took all this energy to keep his body standing. He wasn't able to extend a hand to others. And besides....

If he reached out and helped the man up, what would he do then? He wouldn't be able to treat his wounds, or console him in his grief, or even give him water to drink.

Suddenly, the man let out a groan. Then he began coughing violently. Once it passed, he groaned again. He was probably gravely wounded. His groan was fraught with pain, as if his innards were being twisted.

"Somebody... help me..." The man moaned. He gasped for air like a wounded animal. "Somebody... please...."

Shion plugged his ears. He closed his eyes. He knew he was being a coward. Hadn't he learned so many times over how cowardly, how shameful it was not trying to see, not trying to listen?

*Look. Listen. Don't try to make excuses. Fight with anything that tries to make you. Your enemies aren't only outside of you. They're inside you, too. You have to fight with your own self who tries to avert your eyes from what you don't want to see, and cover your ears from things you don't want to hear.*

*I know. I know, Nezumi. But I can't do it now. Right now, I'm more powerless and fragile than anything. I can't bear seeing, or hearing, any more.*

The man lifted his face. Their eyes met. To his utter misfortune, their eyes had met. Shion shrank back. The man was dying. He was on the brink, but unable to die completely, and writhing in the suffering of it.

"Help... me..."

Perhaps his bones were broken; perhaps his innards were crushed: bloody foam was spilling out of the man's mouth. His whole body was convulsing in small jerks. For the man, death was the only path out of his suffering. But even Death was laughing scornfully at him. It would not visit him so easily. His residual life came back to lash the man again and again.

He came crawling towards them. His gaze never left Shion. His eyes were like a murky swamp, and at the same time, like a bottomless cavern.

"Help me..."

*Please. Save me. Save me and raise me from this eternal suffering. Let me rest—oh, please—let me be at peace.*

Shion swallowed the saliva in his mouth. Before he knew it, he was kneeling down beside the man who was lying on his back. His long neck protruded from his shirt which was reduced to rags. It was a thin, stringy, pitiful neck. Even above ground, he had probably not led a hospitable life. It was admirable for him to have come this far.

The man was looking only at Shion. A murky swamp, a bottomless cavern. Its clouded depths reflected nothing, harboured nothing. His eyes did not even blink. Only his bloodstained lips were moving.

"Why... did I have to..." he croaked.

Yes. What did this man ever do? Why did he have to go through something like this? He was a West Block resident: why, for that reason solely, did he have to be crushed like an insect? For what reason did he have to endure so much suffering?

"Why... why..."

The man's lips never stopped moving. Wringing the last strength from his body, he repeated his question, over and over and over.

*Tell me. Why? Why? Why? Why?*

Shion, stooped above the man's face, slowly shook his head.

*I can't answer that. I can't give you any answer at all.*

"I'm sorry," he whispered. If there was anything he could do, it was....

He put his fingers to the man's throat. It was damp, yet cold. All he had to do was put a little strength into these fingers. His weakening breathing would probably stop without any pain. Then he would be at peace. *If there's anything I could do, it would be to flex these fingers, and choke him.*

On his palms, his fingers, he felt the sensation of raw flesh and bone. His slight convulsions, and his pulse. The man's mouth opened, and bloody foam and a groan poured forth. The tip of his tongue was wiggling. Shion's arms trembled. He couldn't put any strength in them.

"Stop, that's enough."

He was pulled back by the shoulder. The neck slid from Shion's fingers like it was coated in sticky ooze.

"He'll never go easily like that."

Shion turned around, and gazed at Nezumi. For an instant, a shadow flitted across his glittering dark-grey eyes. It was a pitying shadow.

"Nezumi, I..."

"You can't do it." A quivering sigh escaped his shapely lips. "I think Executioner might be an even worse job for you than Actor."

Shoving Shion aside, Nezumi stepped forward. The man was lying on his back, breathing raggedly. With every breath, there was a gurgling at the back of his throat. His fingers bent, and clawed at the air. His suffering was not allayed even a little. The man only lay and gurgled, as if he had even lost the strength to writhe in pain. Nezumi knelt down on one knee, crouched low, and whispered in his ear.

"Does it hurt?"

Only the sound of breathing answered him.

"It'll be alright. You'll feel better soon."

"Feel... better..."

"Yeah. You hung in there well. There won't be any more suffering for you. Relax, and close your eyes."

"I committed... a crime..."

"A crime?"

"I beat... a little child... once..."

"Mm-hmm."

"I tricked... an elderly... and st-stole... money..."

"Mm-hmm."

"I told lots... and lots... of lies..."

"Mm-hmm."

"I b... betrayed... so... many people..."

Nezumi slid a pair of leather gloves on. Then, he gently stroked the man's cheek.

"Good. I've heard everything. It's alright now, everything is forgiven."

"For...given..."

"Yeah. All your crimes are now forgiven. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Nezumi's hand rested over the man's mouth and nose.

"You endured. You lived. I admire you from the bottom of my heart, and dedicate a song to you."

"A song... for me..."

"For you."

With the bottom half of his face covered, the man narrowed his eyes. He was smiling. Shion couldn't believe what he was seeing. He stared transfixed at the man's softened eyes.

*He's smiling.*

"Close your eyes softly. See, all the suffering... it's going away."

A quiet melody flowed through the air. Soft, lilting, the sounds overlapped. Shion felt like his own body was rising up. It was weightless, like cotton fluff, and bobbed and drifted on the breeze. Like a bird, he faced the stream of air, and soared. Released from myriad things, he was free.

*His song steals away souls that are struggling because they can't die. Just like how the wind scatters flower petals, his song cuts the soul away from the body.*

Inukashi had once said those words. It was not a lie. Indeed, his soul was being led off. To some place that was not here, it was being carried effortlessly. It was being thieved away.

The singing stopped. Silence wrapped around them. Shion had closed his eyes without realizing. The silence seemed to gently urge him to lift his eyelids. He opened his eyes to see Nezumi still on one knee, about to take his hand off the man's face.

The man still had his eyes closed. His mouth was still stained with blood, but it was no longer twisted in agony.

"Has he passed away?"

"Just now." Nezumi let out a long exhale, and slumped back against the wall. He took off his gloves, and clenched them in his fist.

"Piece of shit," he heard Nezumi swear under his breath.

"Nezumi..."

"Fucking, idiotic piece of shit."

"Who're you talking about?"

"You."

The pair of gloves whizzed towards him. As if they had a will of their own, they attacked Shion, smacked him right on the face, and slid to the ground.

"You're hopeless. Foolish, clumsy, useless beyond all hope."

"Yeah."

Shion picked the gloves up. Nezumi was right. He was foolish, clumsy, and useless. Powerless, and unskilled. No matter how many insults were hurled at him, he could only nod and agree.

"Not just you." Nezumi raked his bangs up, and looked down. "So am I, and the guy that just died. We're all pieces of shit."

"You're not!" Shion leaned forward to face him. Nezumi lifted his face, and furrowed his brow.

"We're the same. You and I."

"No we're not. We're totally different."

"How?"

Shion drew his chin back, and looked directly into the pair of grey eyes.

"You saved him."

"Me? I just helped the guy stop breathing. Gave him a little push."

"Isn't that the same as giving him salvation?"

The rims of Nezumi's eyes quavered slightly.

"It's murder."

It was a word he had not expected to hear. Nezumi blinked slowly, just once, in front of Shion's eyes, and extended a hand to him.

"Give me my gloves."

"Huh?"

"My gloves. Give them back to me."

"Oh—right."

With the leather gloves back in his hands, Nezumi clicked his tongue irritably and muttered that they had gotten dirty.

"Now they've got that guy's blood and spit on it. These were my favourite gloves."

"Nezumi... what do you mean by murder?"

"Murder is murder," Nezumi answered brusquely. "What I did was kill that man. I covered his mouth while he was still alive, and suffocated him. People usually call that murder, Shion, just in case you didn't know."

"But thanks to you, he was saved. He was freed from suffering."

"So?"

"So—" Shion stammered, "so you saved him. Now he's at rest. He was released from pain, he was able to repent his sins, and he was able to go peacefully. What you did wasn't murder. It was salvation."

Nezumi leaned against the wall and blinked at him again.

"That's arrogant of you."

"Arrogant?"

"Yeah. That's arrogant of you, you know that? Arrogant enough to be able to call killing someone 'salvation'. Who are you, Shion? God? Are you mighty enough that you can preside over other people's deaths?"

"Nezumi, I just—"

"That man shouldn't have gone peacefully," Nezumi said savagely.

"Huh?"

"He should have kept suffering until he died. He should never have repented his sins and gone in tranquility. He should have loathed and cursed his unfair death, and he should have gasped his last breaths writhing in pain. Look."

Nezumi jerked his chin.

"Just look at this room. Remember what the execution chamber back there looked like. How could you leave this world peacefully after being crushed, killed, and tormented like mere insects? You can't. Of course you can't. Most people who get caught in the Hunt don't escape. They're forced to die a gruesome death. And when those dying people leave, they ought to leave strewing words of suffering and hatred everywhere. Then at least their true feelings—even if it's just deep resentment or damnation... They should never have their true feelings stolen from them. A peaceful death would be a fake imitation. Getting treated like bugs, getting abused, only to die *smiling*? What salvation, huh? That's just a convenient excuse. It's a low, filthy excuse. Don't you agree? There's only gruesome death here. I trust even *you* would be getting the picture by now, I hope?"

"Yeah..."

"Do you really understand? Then—" Nezumi averted his eyes from Shion. His grey eyes had only shifted a little, but Shion felt like a shadow had been thrown over the light that had been shining on him dimly. It was impossible, he knew, but he could feel it.

"Then restrain your arrogance. Respect death as it is. Don't think so highly of yourself, and don't think you can be the one to give people a painless death. Don't ever put your fingers around someone's throat again."

Shion stretched both his palms. He could still feel man's neck on his hands. His fingertips were shaking.

*If these hands had power, if they had the power to bring a peaceful death, if they had the power to steal souls away like Nezumi, what would I have done?*

He asked himself, and Shion felt like his shaking fingers were answering him.

*I probably wouldn't have loosened my grip... and if that's called murder, then I would have become the murderer. But—but—could that really be evil?*

"Nezumi."

"What?"

"Is it wrong to make excuses?"

"What?"

"Is it wrong to be released from suffering in the last moment of your life? Is it wrong to die smiling?"

Whether it was just an excuse, or fake imitation, Shion, unlike Nezumi, wasn't able to reject the fact that people wished a peaceful death, and that there were those who wanted to

grant that wish. Nezumi sighed.

"Shion, do you still not understand? If you think of the dozens—no, hundreds by now, if you think of the people who have been killed already... what happens to those hundreds of lives, their hatred, their resentment? Are you gonna make excuses, and pretend it never existed?"

"No. It wouldn't happen that way. That would never be tolerated. But that's what the survivors are supposed to do. They live, they remember, and they tell others. They tell the truth of what happened in this place. It's a job for the survivors—for us. We'll engrave it into our memory, and never forget. But—but at least—for those who are already dying... if only they could go without hatred, if only we could—"

"Grant them an eternal slumber?"

"Yeah."

"Idealistic, aren't you."

"I don't think it's wrong. I don't think what you did is murder, at least. I just can't see it that way."

Nezumi's breathing quickened slightly. A shadow skimmed across his eyes. His gaze darkened as he looked at Shion, and wavered along with his breaths.

"Remembering is the role of the survivors, huh... convenient, isn't it? How can you be so sure that there'll even be survivors? No wait, I see, you're already assuming you'll survive. Quite the optimist, aren't you, young master?"

"We vowed together that we'd make it back alive."

"That we'd never die, no matter what?"

"Yeah. We'll live, and go back to that room together."

Back to that room. The basement room in which they lived flashed in the back of Shion's mind. It was vivid, as if it were right before his eyes. The numerous books he had taken a whole week to sort through; the bookshelves, which covered the wall and reached to the ceiling; the beautiful and lavishly-bound book—Nezumi had said it was a story of a far-off land; the tattered and faded, though sturdy, chair; the pitiful bed with its stiff mattress; the pot puffing steam over the heater; the little mice scampering about the room. Cravat, Hamlet, Tsukiyo.

Shion clutched at his chest. He yearned for them so much, he felt dizzy.

*I want to go back, to that place. I want to live those days once more.* Those images did not shatter like the phantom vision of No. 6. It didn't ripple and disappear. It stood firm, vivid and almost repulsively real. It brought to him even the smell of the books, and the chattering of the mice. The impulse to dig his nails into his skin and tear at himself, pressed on his chest. He longed, and desperately so. He wanted to go back.

That room was the only place he intended to return to alive.

Nezumi gave a little snap of his fingers.

"You should survive and write a reportage of your infiltration into the Correctional Facility. Who knows, it might sell."

"You told me a while ago I wasn't meant to be a writer."

"Did I? It's quite the difficult task finding the right job for you. But I do acknowledge that you have a way with handling dogs, and sorting books, for one thing."

"Speaking of which, I think I left a half-finished book on your bed."

"What book?"

"It's a story that takes place in some faraway land. About a man who sells his soul to the Devil."

"Ah." Nezumi closed his eyes for some moments, and muttered something under his breath. "Shion," he said.

"Hm?"

"We've only just started this journey."

"I know. Everything lies ahead... right?"

"I'm sure looking forward to it."

"To what?"

"Watching you," Nezumi replied. "Remembering is the role of the survivors—your own words. I wonder how far you'd be able to act on them? I'll be sure to watch carefully whether you seriously try to remember everything you see from here on out, or force yourself to forget. I'll see it right through to the end, when those lips go from spewing pretty words to twisting into a scowl."

His tone was flat and regular. There was no hint of sarcasm, anger, or irritation. Though devoid of all emotion, his voice, for some reason, was heavy. Shion clenched his fingers, and posed a question.

"Do you not believe me?"

"If it's about your memorization abilities, then I have absolute faith in that."

"Which means you have doubts when it comes to my own humanity."

"Quite a few."

Nezumi's fingers reached out and pinched Shion's chin. His eyes narrowed, and their grey light intensified.

"I've always thought we could never live in harmony," he said, "that no matter how much we lived together, how many experiences we shared, I would end my life without ever having understood you. Shion, I'm going to tell you the truth. Sometimes... I feel hatred towards you to the point that I want to kill you. Just happens sometimes."

"I knew that."

"You knew?"

"I kind of realized that you—hated me."

Nezumi's fingertips dug into his chin.

"You're like No. 6 itself. It flings pretty words and ideologies around, but its true form is something hideous. Like a cruel devil shrouded in a beautiful veil."

"And you're saying that's me?" Shion grabbed Nezumi's wrist, and wrenched his fingers free from his chin. "Is that my true form, as you see it?"

There was no answer. Shion gripped Nezumi's wrist tightly.

"I'm different from No. 6. Absolutely different. You don't realize that."

He could feel Nezumi's pulse against his clenched fingers. He gripped harder.

"How are you different?"

"I would never deceive you. I wouldn't wear any veil. I'm laying everything before you, as who I really am."

"Shion, let go of my hand. It hurts."



"I'm laying it out right in front of you. Your eyes are the ones that are too clouded to see. You cling to the idea of No. 6, and don't try to see me without tying me to it. True form? You must be kidding me," he spat. "When have you ever honestly *tried* to see me as who I am?"

His anger boiled, and its heat scalded his body.

*You're the one who never tries to take that step towards me. If you hate me so much you want to kill me, then why don't you? You only ever judge my crimes, or loathe me through the lens of No. 6. If you could hurl your emotions at me—me as a human being—then even if it was hatred so potent it was murderous, I would accept it. I've steeled myself to accept it.*

*Why don't you understand that?*

Shion's anger passed its boiling point, and now frothed and steamed fiercely. Nezumi shook his head as if to push him away.

"Let go." He extracted his wrist from Shion's fingers. "Geez, don't just grip as hard as you can like that. That could've broken bones."

"You're not that delicate."

"I'm talking about your strength. If you had this kind of power, I wish you'd use it when you actually need it. Look, it's all red."

Nezumi's extended wrist now bore faint red bands. Shion had been gripping harder than he thought.

"Didn't know you had this much power, did you?" Nezumi asked.

"No, I didn't."

"See, you don't even know about yourself." Nezumi slid his gloves on, hiding the reddened part of his wrist. "You don't know what kind of human you are. Your Mama the talented baker probably doesn't know either. She probably thinks you're a gentle and adorable, well-behaved little boy."

"Not like you know either, right?"

"Me? Well, I dunno about that," he said lightly. "I probably know more than you or your Mama, to say the least. Shion, you're right: I was too caught up with No. 6 to see you clearly. But it's not always like that. Sometimes—just occasionally—I feel like I've been able catch your tail, grasp a piece of the human you really are."

"And that's when you want to kill me."

"No, no that's not it. I don't want to kill—rather..."

"Rather?"

"I might even be—afraid."

"Afraid? What do you mean?"

Nezumi lapsed into silence. His lips moved slightly.

*Monster.*

Was that the word his thin, shapely lips had moved to form?

Monster?

Agitated, Shion opened his mouth to prompt him again.

But there were footsteps. Several sets of them. They were slightly more steady than the fallen man's. A couple men and a woman overtook them from behind, and sank onto the floor in the middle of the room. They were all out of breath, but were not on the verge of dying.

"It's all over," Nezumi said.

He meant that the task was complete. From the crowd of unfortunate people caught up in the Hunt in the West Block, they had eliminated the ones who had fallen on the way to the elevator; then, they had hurled everyone into the dark depths of the underground. They had tossed them away: the elderly, infants, men, and women, without distinction.

"Well, let's go, then."

"Huh?"

"Don't 'huh' me, I'm saying we have to move our chess piece forward. Nothing will get done if we hang around chatting. About time anyway, since we're probably both getting sick of it."

"Nezumi, wait. What you were saying bef—"

"That's enough."

Words were cut off by more words.

"Unfortunately this isn't exactly a situation where we can indulge in idle conversation. Damnit," Nezumi swore, "I'm always thrown off track when I'm with you. This is what I mean by piece of shit. Come on. We can wait forever, but no one'll bring us afternoon tea. Break time is over. Get moving."

"Where are we going?"

"We're going back along this passage, opposite of how we just came. Now isn't that easy? I think even *you* might be able to manage it."

"Go back! What for?"

"To move forward."

Nezumi started walking. Shion followed behind him once again. The passage reeked of blood. He wondered if odours could have weight to them. The smell of blood that still flowed from the bodies was heavy, and seemed to slither over the floor, and crawl up from his feet.

He realized he was getting used to this smell. Compared to when he had walked down this path the first time, the queasiness in his chest and the impulse to cover his nose were not as strong. He was getting used to the smell of blood. Did that mean he was becoming stronger, or turning numb?

Shion took wider steps as if to tear apart the stench that swathed him.

*Monster.*

The word that had slipped voicelessly from Nezumi's lips: what did it mean? Even if he asked, he would probably not get an answer.

Shion lifted his face. Nezumi was close enough that if he stretched, he could touch his shoulder. The stench of blood grew thicker. The groans and screams of people who could not die came pressing on him. Shion was faced anew with the reality that he was standing at the brink of life and death itself.

"Nezumi."

There was no answer. His right shoulder only rose slightly.

"On the floorplan of the Correctional Facility, apart from the newly-built area, there was another large blank space underground, wasn't there?"

"Yeah..."

"Is this that blank space?"

"Yeah."

A clear answer bounced back to him.

"You knew about this place, didn't you?"

"What if I did?"

"Then what was the line that was extending further down from the space?"

This time, Nezumi did not even turn around. But his gait slackened.

"You noticed?" he said.

"Well, it seemed out of place..."

It was an odd line. Especially because the map was filled with layers of electric circuitry, barriers at equal intervals, and countless rooms that made up the complicated interior structure of the Correctional Facility, the two blanks were eye-catching. The first was the newly-built area on the topmost floor; the other was this basement area. From here, there was a white line drawn that extended still further downwards. A straight line. It wasn't the symbol for a circuit or pipe; in fact, it looked like a passageway. But there was nothing at the end of it, not even a blank space. It abruptly ended in the middle. In the Correctional Facility, every minute detail was carefully calculated to cut off any possibility of escape; it was designed to maximize its functionality in the most efficient way possible. Amidst all of that, this line was a queer and unnatural existence.

Nezumi stopped. Turning only partly towards Shion, he threw a glance at him.

"What do you think it is?"

"Is it something I would be able to figure out?"

"No. No matter how much you put your pitiful imagination to work, you could probably never guess. I bet this place was off the radar of your imagination too, by quite a bit."

If there was such a radar, it had long been shattered to pieces. He had never imagined that a world like this could exist.

He had known nothing. But now, he knew.

The two blanks: with his flimsy imagination, he could not perceive what could be on the topmost floor. But he understood now what was in the basement. He knew now, down to the marrow of his bones. This place, which had been a vacant space on the floorplan, was the Hell that the Holy City had materialized in this world. No. 6 was a city state: this meant that humans made it function. Then did that mean it was possible for humans to become this brutal? Then how heartless could they ultimately become? Then how could they stop themselves from becoming so? Then....

Shion chewed his lip. While chewing, he gave his head a shake.

It was no good to think now—he had neither the time nor the strength. But someday, someday surely, he would find the answer.

How heartless could humans become?

How could they stop themselves from becoming so?

Someday, he would seek it out.

Shion sucked in a breath, and smelled blood. He had confidence. The confidence was firmly seated deep in his breast, that someday he would grasp the answer with his own hands. Like an unshakable boulder, it existed. It was also the conviction that no matter what situation may befall him, he would still be able to keep a foothold and remain within the range of humanity.

Nezumi was still twisted around, looking at Shion. Shion fixed his gaze directly on Nezumi.

*Yes, Nezumi. I'm confident. As long as I'm beside you, I can say with conviction that I can remain human.*

"What?" Nezumi blinked. "What're you grinning about?"

"Grinning?" He brought a hand to his cheek. Sweat and blood had mingled, dried, and left a crust on his skin. "Was I grinning?"

"You sure were. Really, would you smile in this kind of situation? I thought you'd finally lost it."

"I'm still sane. Probably."

"I sure hope so. In a place like this, you could probably hop the border between sanity and insanity with one leap."

"If I went mad, would you toss me away here?"

"Of course. I can't have you being more of a burden than you already are."

"I figured as much."

*Heh.* Nezumi's lip curled. He was also smiling, in this kind of situation. It was a smile neither bitter nor cold. It was somewhat mirthful, even.

"I wouldn't toss you away, Shion."

Shion drew his chin back a little. There was no way it would be followed by any sugary line like, "I'll take you there if I have to carry you myself."

"I'll slit your throat in one resolute stroke."

Still smiling, Nezumi lifted a single finger. His grey eyes were not smiling at all. They were still, like the surface of a frozen lake.

Shion clutched at his throat without thinking. There was a scratch that Nezumi had left a few days ago. He had made a shallow cut on his skin with the tip of his knife. The scar from the wound, which had bled only slightly and had closed up long ago, was thudding with a pulse.

"Relax," Nezumi drawled. "Even I take pity on people. I'll end it all in an instant. I would never make you suffer."

"Thanks," Shion said, for want of anything else to say, still clutching his throat. "That's kind of you."

"I'm always kind to you. Sometimes I think I'm spoiling you too much. It's something I regret nowadays."

"It could be a temporary state of confusion."

"Huh?"

"Make sure you can distinguish whether I've actually gone mad or if I'm suffering temporary confusion from shock. Then you can decide if you still want to slit my throat. It shouldn't be too late for the decision."

"If I have the time."

"Hey, wait a minute," Shion said indignantly. The scar was still throbbing under his fingers.

If he was going to be killed by Nezumi, he had no complaints. True to his promise, Nezumi would probably slash his throat without causing him any pain or suffering at all. Shion had just seen for himself how welcoming a peaceful death was. He would not complain. But he

did not want to die a meaningless death. He wanted to live and return to that room, no matter what it took.

"It might be hard, but I want you to check for me, just in case. Please."

"How?"

"Just throw water on me. If there's no water... then no choice, I guess, you can slap me across the face like you did back there. They say with fits of hysteria, people can recover with a shock as little as that—"

"I'll give you a kiss."

"Huh?"

"Before I slit your throat, I'll give you a kiss," Nezumi said softly. "You'll find out exactly how much better I am at giving farewell kisses. Then you can go off to heaven."

"Nezumi..."

He was probably bright red in the cheeks, right down to his ears. He felt hot. Even his forehead was damp with sweat. Nezumi spoke in a joking tone, but he was most likely not joking at all.

*Whether you go mad, or get wounded, if you can't move anymore, then that's the end of you. So I'll give you a farewell kiss, before I slit your throat.*

A kiss of death. The innermost part of Shion's body pulsed in response. He shook his head. No matter how seductive, he had to reject anything that tried to lead him to death.

"That's no good. I need you to find another way, or else I'd be in trouble."

"Why?"

"My panic attack would get worse."

Nezumi snapped his eyes open for an instant, then turned his face aside to snort. Although he was trying not to laugh, his body shook with the effort, and he couldn't quite restrain himself.

"You—" he gasped, "You really—don't get it, do you? To think you'd... give me a serious answer... I... you're really dense."

"Is it that funny?"

"Couldn't have done better." Removing his gloves, Nezumi wiped at his eyes with his fingers. "I would never have thought I'd... laugh for real in a place like this. Really funny."

"I didn't really mean it as a joke."

"Alright, Shion, spare me. I understand now. You'll never go insane, yeah?" Wiping his eyes again, Nezumi drew a short breath. "Humans are more prone to laughing than I thought. New discovery."

The smile vanished from Nezumi's face. With a stony expression that reminded Shion of a mask, Nezumi slowly motioned with his chin.

"Let's go."

They were at the end of the passageway. They were standing in that place again. It seemed as if the darkness had turned a deeper colour since their last escape from it.

The mountain of casualties had grown higher. It was natural, since the third group had added their numbers to the pile. But nevertheless, Shion found himself backing away unconsciously. To think the mound of fallen and crushed people would grow even larger...

"Hmm, I think this would do," Nezumi muttered, standing amongst the torrent of

darkness, stink, and the groans of people unable to die. Shion felt a faint chill around his back.

"Nezumi, what are we about to—?"

"We're gonna climb."

"Climb?"

"Have you any experience with hiking or rock climbing?"

"Nezumi... what are you talking about...? By climbing, surely you don't mean—"

"I sure do mean it. There's gonna be no path. No signs, map, or portable lights. You only have your body to depend on. Got it? Make sure you keep up."

Nezumi swung a foot onto the black heap. Shion stood stock-still, with his mouth hanging half-open.

"What are you waiting for? Hurry up." He could hear Nezumi's voice raining down on his head. It didn't contain a smidgeon of irritation or contempt, but the voice hurt him. He felt like he was being struck with a whip.

*I won't allow any hesitation. There's no option left for us to go back, to delay, to look for another path. We have no choice but to move on. And I won't allow you to hesitate here, Shion.*

*I know. I know. I know.*

Shion reached out into the black heap. His fingers were shaking violently. He couldn't grasp properly.

"Shion!"

He knew. He wasn't allowed to cower. He thrust his knuckle in his mouth, and bit down hard. The shaking stopped. The sound of the earth rumbling came from somewhere in the mound. He froze. It wasn't the earth rumbling. They were the voices of people. This mound was made up of people. *Don't forget. Live, and commit everything to memory. Live through it, and pass our story on.*

*I won't let myself hesitate.*

He reached out. The trembling in his fingers had stopped completely.

#### [Editor's Note]

*The Nuremburg Interviews:* A record of interviews conducted by American psychiatrist Leon Goldensohn with Nazi war criminals at Nuremburg, the first place where core Nazi war criminals were tried. Individuals interviewed included Rudolf Hoess, commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp; Wilhelm Keitel, chief-of-staff of the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces (OKW); and Hermann Goering, commander-in-chief of the air force.

CHAPTER 3  
Those Whose Buds Bloom

Then shall I speak of the two primal Spirits of existence, of whom the Very Holy thus spoke to the Evil One: neither our choices nor words nor acts, not our inner selves nor our souls agree.

-Persian myth, John R. Hinnells

The baby started crying. Lying atop a grimy blanket filled with holes, it flailed wildly, raising a voice loud enough to echo off the ceiling.

*Geez, enough of you already.*

Inukashi clicked his tongue, and put the coins he was counting back into the bag. It was his profit for the day, and it was a hefty sum.

A night had passed since the Hunt, and the West Block was still in the throes of confusion and anguish. Nobody knew how many had been killed, kidnapped, or had escaped, and no one had the energy or the means of finding out.

Early this morning, Inukashi took a dog with him to walk down the bazaar. More accurately, it was what had been the bazaar—the patch of land where it had once been until yesterday.

Most of the buildings—though it was doubtful whether those barracks even deserved such a name—had been destroyed, and were reduced to rubble. This Hunt had been particularly large and sweeping compared to the ones before. No, that was an understatement. Although they had destroyed homes before, even razed them completely for the sake of capturing people, they had never been in the habit of being bent on destruction like this. If Inukashi could get a bird's-eye view from the sky, he would probably have seen a strange scene—a crater in the middle of the market, with debris forming a ring around the edges.

The bazaar had once been filled with a raucous, though lively bustle, lined with store barracks of questionable nature, with prostitutes, pickpockets, starving children, old beggars, cockroaches and rats roaming about. But in mere minutes, it had all but vanished from this land.

*It's mindblowing.*

Inukashi stood atop the ruins, and sighed. It was not a sigh of despair. He was not so innocent anymore to feel anguish towards this catastrophe. Rather, he was astonished.

*This is how far they're gonna go.*

The people of the West Block were not enemies. They had not retaliated. They had merely gathered there, without power or weapons. What reason did they have to be crushed to this extent?

Rather than feel anguish, or wrath, he found himself simply astonished.

This destructive power, such thorough ruthlessness. It amazed him.

He bent to pick up a piece of debris at his feet. Although it was crumbled badly, it had no burn marks. So No. 6 had not used firearms in the Hunt this time around. Usually they used outdated high-calibre weapons like cannons or howitzers; sometimes they simply burned everything to the ground with flamethrowers.

Inukashi twitched his nose. Even with his olfactory senses, he could not smell the distinctive smoky smell of firearms. Only the overwhelming stench of dead bodies wafted over to him. An odourless weapon. It would leave nothing in the wake of its destruction.

*Acoustic shockwaves?*

He tried saying it out loud. He remembered hearing a little about it before from Nezumi. They had been talking about whales. He didn't remember how they got to talking about them. Inukashi had neither touched nor seen a whale before. He didn't even know what the ocean was like. The world that Inukashi knew was limited to the ruined hotel and its surroundings. For as long as he could remember, he had lived within those boundaries. He had never thought of travelling outside of the West Block. He was satisfied with his segment of the world, with the ruins, his dogs, and the market at the centre. He had no intention of going anywhere. But Nezumi was a wanderer. He was the kind to appear on a whim, and disappear on a whim. He would never settle in one place. Inukashi didn't trust wanderers, and he didn't want anything to do with them if he could help it. But he was attracted to the tales of the world that were spun from his mouth. They were stories of worlds he had never seen and would probably never see. The ocean was one of these. A wide, blue expanse brimming with saltwater, and the enormous animals that lived within it—Inukashi's heart quickened with excitement just hearing about them. Although he had no intention of going anywhere, his heart was drawn to the unknown world that Nezumi told of. It was probably because of his skilful storytelling, and his beautiful voice—though "beautiful" was far from adequate in describing it, "beautiful" was often the only word he seemed to be able to come up with. And out of desire to hear his voice and singing, the residents of the West Block would scrape their meagre wages together, and would flock to the shabby playhouse.

*Everyone falls into his trap so easily. But I'm not like that. Sure, I listened to his stories as if I were in a trance, but I wasn't tricked. I noticed. I still had enough wits to.*

Inukashi threw his chest out, although there was no one to boast to on this pile of rubble. But he had not missed it.

Inukashi had noticed Nezumi's tone of voice change slightly during his story about whales. It had grown flat, losing all of his softness that usually stroked the listener gently as if with a feather. It was just when Inukashi had picked a flea from one of his dog's furry collars and tossed it into his mouth.

"Acoustic shockwaves?" Inukashi licked his fingers, and echoed Nezumi. "What's that?"

"A sound beam. They turn sound waves into shockwaves to numb the prey and capture it."

"Those... spleen whales, or whatever?"

"Sperm whales."

"Hah," Inukashi ejected. "Catching food with sound waves, huh. That's pretty impressive. If there was a sperm whale in front of me right now, I think I'd want an autograph."



"Humans might do it too."

"Uh?"

"I'm saying humans might start using it too."

"Those acoustic shock-whatcha-ma-callits?"

"Yeah."

"To catch food?"

"For destruction."

To destroy with sound waves? Inukashi didn't understand. But then again, more than half of what Nezumi usually said was incomprehensible to him. Nor did he want to understand. But it was also true that many of those words he could not understand left a mark in his mind.

For destruction.

"Did he..."

Inukashi clenched a piece of debris in his hand.

*Was he predicting that this would occur? Did he know that this destruction, this catastrophe was coming?*

The wind was blowing. As if to mock what had happened, today was a bright, sunny day, and a beautiful blue sky spread out over his head. How alluring the colour was. It stung at his eyes.

Inukashi took a deep breath. His body trembled at the joy that he was alive, right this moment, and breathing. Many had died. Nezumi and Shion were missing. They were either buried under this rubble, or had succeeded in sneaking into the Correctional Facility—either way, they would never meet again. He was sure they wouldn't.

*Everyone's dead. Everyone's disappeared. But I'm still here, and I've survived.* He licked his bottom lip. He was smiling, though at no one in particular.

*I'm alive.*

A triumphant glory raced through his body and made him want to let out a cry; it shook his body and soul with an even greater force. Loss? Listlessness? He had no time to be feeling those. *Those who live are the winners. I lived. I win. Aren't I right, Nezumi?*

A dog barked. It dug at the rubble with its front paws, nudged at it with its nose, and scrabbled at it again.

"Find anything?"

The dog, which had a grey coat and drooping ears, gave a proud bark, and trotted over to Inukashi to drop the contents of its mouth onto his palm. It was a silver coin.

"Good boy." He patted the dog on the head. "Now dig some more. We gotta find more cash."

The dog's tail wagged furiously at being complimented by its master.

"Listen. This is where the meat shop used to be. Dig, and you'll find meat. That'll be your dinner tonight. Meat and money. Make sure you find both."

This time, a small white dog gave a bark. In its mouth was a cloth pouch.

"Whoa, nice!"

There were no gold coins, but there were several silvers and plenty of loose change. Inukashi felt like jumping up and down. Frankly, he had not expected to find this much booty

this easily.

*I'm lucky today. Might be the best luck I've had yet.*

He encouraged his dogs to dig more, find more.

He had already heard that the owner of the meat shop had a fat sum of money stored away. He had just confirmed that owner of the meat shop was lying lifeless underneath the rubble. A familiar hairy arm had been poking out from a gap in a crumbled wall. It was the same arm that used to throw twigs and stones at kids loitering in front of the store, or at beggars. Inukashi himself had nearly been punched by that arm once. The man had worn large golden rings on his thumb and index finger, and every time he swung his arm up for a blow, they used to glitter. Inukashi made away with the ring on his index finger. It didn't go as well for his thumb, for it had been blown off entirely.

*He was a stingy, greedy bastard. But too bad. Once you're a corpse, you can't spend your money, much less save it.*

After the meat shop, Inukashi planned to dig up the used-clothing stall next door. If he did it well, maybe he could get his hands on two, three wearable pieces of clothing. He wanted a thick jacket preferably, but he would take even a single shirt, a single cape. After that was the food stall. If he could find the large soup pot that they used to stir leftovers in over the fire, it would come in handy.

Inukashi felt a presence. His eyes darted around, and he clicked his tongue quietly. Quite a number of people had appeared out of nowhere, and were beginning to dig up the piles of rubble as well. Some unearthed something and raised a cry, like Inukashi had just done. A gaggle of dirty children were fighting over a piece of cloth, presumably a blanket. For the time being here in the West Block, physical items would probably be more cherished than money. Money was useless in a destroyed place like this. But within a month, this place would turn back into a market again, unchanged from before. It would be lined with the same haphazard shops, people would come and go, and the place would fill with bellows, cheers, laughs, and smells of every kind. Prostitutes would stand in the dim alleyways, and beggars would wander about. Gold and silver would speak, and speak loudly.

More and more people flocked to the debris. They seemed to spring up out of the destroyed buildings themselves. If Inukashi dawdled any longer, all the valuable items would be carried off. He had countless competitors.

*What pain-in-the-asses.*

Inukashi clicked his tongue again before laughing voicelessly. He lifted his face, and threw a glance at the dim outline of No. 6's fortress walls in the distance, the walls of special alloy.

*No. 6, this is who we are. No matter how many times you step on us, we'll raise our heads again. We'll never be destroyed. We'll crawl across the ground, we'll set our roots down, and we'll live. We're a lot tougher than you think.*

He narrowed his eyes. The special alloy caught the streams of light coming from the sky, and glittered. Inukashi had always averted his eyes from that light. It had been too blinding for his eyes. But not today. The glittering wall looked as cheap and flimsy as the rings on the meat shop owner's hand.

"Maybe you're the one that's fragile." He startled himself. He glanced around, wondering

if someone else had muttered it, but there was no one else around, other than his dogs, within hearing distance. Inukashi was the only one who spoke a human language.

He pressed a hand to his mouth, and scowled.

He wasn't supposed to think about No. 6. He wasn't supposed to have anything to do with it. The Holy City had always reigned over their heads. It was a tyrant. It possessed absolute strength, and crushed the West Block beneath its feet. But on the other hand, it was also true that people and merchandise trickled out of the city into the West Block through smuggling routes. It was also true that Inukashi himself gained a share of the profits that came from it.

He would latch onto No. 6 like a flea or tick, and live on. After all, their existence was nothing more than fleas and ticks to No. 6—though city residents had probably never seen a flea or tick before.

That was what he had thought all along.

*The Holy City reigns; as for us, we're as good as insects.*

Thinking like that did him no harm. He had long discarded any pride or shame. Once he did away with useless things, and told himself that was just how things were, he could live anywhere.

This was Inukashi's philosophy, which he had built up during his life. He had lived by it, with his dogs, and done decently more or less.

But these days, he felt a little strange. The axis of his philosophy was beginning to wobble. The fortress walls of the Holy City, which were supposed to be absolute, sometimes looked to him like a cheap toy. Here he was, mumbling things like, '*maybe you're the one that's fragile*'. There was something wrong with this. It was clearly odd.

He thought maybe—what if—but shook his head.

It was an absurd story. Absurd, indeed. A tick was a tick. As long as he minded not to get squished and could manage to suck a little blood in the process, it was good. It was wise not to even think about whether he could tear through the other's vulnerable spot.

Inukashi told himself so, and grimaced again. His mind was frantic, urging him to dig out things of worth instead of leaving it all to his dogs, but his hands remained still.

With his hands dangling, Inukashi furrowed his brow, and turned his scowling face to the city walls.

*The Holy City reigns.*

*As for us, we're as good as insects.*

But too late, the thought had occurred to him: he could shake the foundations of that relationship. He could tear through that artificial wall, and lay No. 6 exposed and naked. It was their fault. *Those two—Shion and Nezumi—poisoned my mind.*

Suddenly, Shion's face flashed in his memory. It was so sudden, Inukashi arched his back and stumbled over, almost touching the ground behind him with his hand.

Shion. The boy whom Nezumi had brought with him. He was a resident of No. 6, hopelessly dense, and—hard to believe—a first-rate criminal.

It was utterly unbelievable. Speaking of fleas and ticks, could he even bring himself to kill any? And that hair. Despite being young, his hair was pure white. It was too weird. Well, maybe his hair wasn't so bad. It was shiny, and not the kind of hair you'd see anywhere. If Inukashi could somehow manage to peel his scalp off, perhaps it would sell for a good

price—but never mind, his appearance wasn't the only weird thing about him; in fact, he was weirder than his appearance.

"Yeah." Shion's clear answer reverberated in his ears. *Are the people of No. 6 the same humans as us?* Inukashi had asked. Shion had given a clear answer.

"Yeah."

Inukashi had scoffed at him, but the instant he had heard those words, his chest had thumped loudly.

The same humans. So the people who lived on this side and that side of the wall were the same?

*Yeah.*

Inukashi could tell more than easily that Shion wasn't just saying this for the sake of saying it; he honestly believed it. According to Shion, it didn't matter where you lived, what colour skin or hair you had; any person fell into the category of "human". It was weirder than anything he could believe. *I should've asked him where he learned that.*

And Nezumi. He was no good, either. He was mysterious, much more dangerous than Shion. Some day, he was planning to utterly destroy No. 6. He was planning to slash No. 6 and tear it apart, like he would slit open a person's belly and drag out their organs with his skilful knife.

Inukashi rubbed his arms. He had goosebumps. It wasn't because of the cool air. Every time he thought of Nezumi, he got these. He was afraid. He would've rather died than admit it, but Inukashi felt a horror towards Nezumi. From the first time they'd met, he had been afraid of him. Those grey eyes, that soul-snatching voice, his way with the knife: it wasn't normal. It was impossible to get a big picture of him. He couldn't place a finger on him. For some reason, it was horrifying. But what was strange was that Nezumi was afraid of Shion. Inukashi wasn't completely sure, but he could feel it. Inukashi trusted his instincts.

Nezumi was afraid of Shion. The reason was beyond him, but this was no mistake. Both of them were weirdos. Odd. *But I—I let myself get poisoned by those two. And I believed them—that we could one day shatter those walls, and bring them down.*

A dog barked. It had apparently found some meat. Drool was dripping from the sides of its mouth. It looked up at Inukashi in a pleading way.

"Eat." Inukashi jerked his chin. The three dogs pounced on the hunk of meat. A hollow-cheeked boy was staring at them intently. Inukashi sniffed loud enough for him to hear.

*Too bad, kid. Here, you gotta find your own food. No one's gonna give you a handout.*

The boy left. The dogs latched onto the meat, and sunk their teeth into it. The sky was blue, and there was not a single cloud in the sky.

*Shion, Nezumi.*

He looked up at the heavens.

*Have you really gone away? Will we really never see each other again? Have you guys really left? Am I the only one here?*

The glory that had raced through his body only moments before showed no sign of bubbling up again.

*How am I supposed to face that wall here in this West Block, without you guys here?*

*Awoooo.*

A dog whined. It wasn't any of the dogs he had brought with him. Inukashi could distinguish each of his dogs by their bark.

This voice was—

Inukashi leapt off the wreckage, and gave a short whistle. A large, tan dog came bounding out of the shadows of what remained of the meat shop from yesterday. It pounced on Inukashi.

"You made it alive, huh."

If the Hunt was close, it would be dangerous to roam the bazaar. But if he shut himself up in the ruins, he wouldn't be able to do business. So Inukashi had ordered this dog to scout the bazaar out. Since it had not come home last night, he had given up, assuming that the dog had been rounded up in the Hunt. Inukashi hadn't expected it to be alive.

"Good job, you pulled through it. But why didn't you come straight home? Hm? You hurt or somethin'?"

Inukashi ran his hands quickly over the dog's body. No blood came off on his hands. It didn't seem to be in pain. It was dirty, but not hurt.

"Well then, what were you up to?" he said sternly. "If you were alive, you should've come straight—" he stopped mid-sentence. He could hear crying. It wasn't the dog. It was— a human? And it sounded like a baby. The dog clamped its jaws on Inukashi's sleeve, and yanked.

"What?"

The dog was telling him to follow. Inukashi had a bad feeling. He never had good feelings about anything, and if he did they often weren't right, but he always had bad feelings. And they often turned out to be right.

*Oh come on, don't tell me....*

The dog led its master between the ruins of the meat shop and clothing store. It turned back, and flicked its ears proudly. Inukashi stood still, and stared at the thing that was nestled in the crack between a crumbled wall and the ground. His gaze wandered for an instant once, then he blinked, and scrutinized the space between the wall and the ground.

It was a baby. No matter how he looked at it, it was a human baby. Wrapped in a dark cloth, it was wailing. It was a clamorous, energetic voice, almost unsuited for this place.

"Were you here with this kid the whole night? Warming him up so he wouldn't freeze?"

*You bet*, the dog's impressive brown tail seemed to say, as it wagged side to side.

"Idiot," Inukashi snapped at him. "What are you gonna do, picking up a human baby? What good is he, if you can't even sell or eat him? What were you thinking?"

Although probably not due to Inukashi's bellow, the baby's wailing escalated to a shrill scream. It was a voice loud enough to make Inukashi wonder for a second if the wall would collapse from its sheer volume. He hastily turned his back to it.

Nothing good came out of mingling with babies. Pigs and goats served as meat, and produced milk as well. There was nothing to lose in taking care of them. But human babies were nothing but hassle, and useless baggage. But then again, it was also possible to sell him off after raising him to a certain age. Indeed in the West Block, there were merchants who bought and sold children.

*No thanks for me, though.*

Inukashi usually never turned things down if it brought him money. He dirtied his

hands with almost any trade. This place wasn't nice enough to let you live on pretty ideologies. Yes. He did anything to stay alive, and he would continue doing so. But trafficking children was one thing he didn't want to do. Only those who had stooped to the lowest of the low laid their hands on that business. Inukashi wasn't trying to preach morals. But he didn't want to fall that low. But that didn't mean he was going to save the baby that was wailing behind him. He liked to think he wasn't prone to the kind of softness that would make him extend a hand out of pity or sympathy, especially if he knew it would be nothing but a burden.

If he left this child as is, without a doubt, it would die. The flighty sky was already starting to turn cloudy. Perhaps it would snow in the afternoon. The ground would freeze over along with the coming of night, and would easily nip the life of that powerless bundle.

But what was it to him? If the baby was going to die, it may as well be sooner than later. If it could leave the world without having to know what suffering was like, maybe that was happiness in a sense. He would make a grave for the baby, at least. It would only take a small hole to bury it. It would be much easier than burying a dog.

*Woof!*

The dog barked, and rammed into Inukashi, almost making him fall over.

"Hey, stop! That's enough fooling around," Inukashi shouted at it. Their eyes met. Even among the other dogs that lived in the ruins, this one was particularly smart. It was also a descendant of the female dog that had raised Inukashi.

*He has the same eyes as my Mum.*

*Peaceful, intelligent eyes.*

*If only all the humans had eyes like my Mum's....*

At times, those thoughts crossed Inukashi's mind.

*If everyone had eyes like my Mum's, maybe the world would be a somewhat better place.*

The dog was dragging the baby out from under the wall. It pawed the ground lightly.

"What the... hell..." Inukashi gulped. He recognized the cloth that the baby was wrapped in. He picked the baby up, and realized that the cloth was a coat. It was second-hand, but of considerable quality.

"Shion..." It was what Shion had been wearing. It was a coat that Rikiga had bought and forced onto him. "Why did Shion...."

The dog lay down at his feet. Inukashi remembered now, that this dog had loved Shion. Shion had loved it too, and would brush its fur almost every day. Both of them were smart; maybe like minds got along.

"Did Shion leave this baby to you?"

Just a single bark—*woof*—an affirmative.

"Th-This must be some kind of joke," Inukashi said, flustered. "Why do I have to end up with some baby? No way in hell am I gonna take care of this. Geez, you must be kidding me."

The baby wriggled in his arms. It wasn't crying anymore. Two watery eyes were fixed on Inukashi. They were black, with a tinge of purple. Depending on the way the light hit them, the purple shone through more strongly. Maybe it was the tears: those eyes reminded him of the surface of a lake at night, brimming with still water. He thought they looked a lot like Shion's eyes. They were similar. Maybe exactly the same.

"Hey, you wouldn't be Shion's kid, would you? He probably doesn't even know how to

have children." Inukashi found himself speaking to it. The baby suddenly broke into a grin. Still looking up at Inukashi, it had raised its voice in an ecstatic giggle. Inukashi felt like something had reached into his chest yanked violently. He felt like he was going to cry.

*What the hell, man.*

Inukashi was agitated at the laughing infant, and also at himself, about to cry. He didn't know what to do.

A shadow crossed the sun. Clouds were coming in. The wind whipped around his body. He felt something icy on the nape of his neck. Inukashi finally realized that he'd been sweating.

*I'm gonna go home.*

Inukashi firmly dug his heels into the ground. The gravel beneath his feet crunched.

*I gotta get home. Uh—so what do I do now... yeah, I'll throw this baby back where it belongs, and I'll wave goodbye. And then, and then... I gotta hurry back to the ruins... oh, before that, I gotta dig out what I can find at the clothing shop...*

He glanced at the rubble beside him, and almost raised a cry. Almost three times as many people from a few minutes ago were swarming around the rubble, digging through the remains of the buildings with their bare hands. They didn't care if their hands bled, or their fingernails peeled off. In this season of brutal cold, warm garments were next to food in necessity. They didn't carry the risk of breaking like dishes, or being crushed, like fruit; if they dug out, washed, and mended the clothes, they could be resold.

*Got a late start.*

Inukashi clicked his tongue. Even if he joined that crowd now, he probably wouldn't be able to find anything much. Could he use his dogs to chase them away? The thought flitted across Inukashi's mind, and he quickly brushed it away. It was too dangerous. The residents of the West Block were always on the edge as they clung to their lives, but today they were even more desperate. No. 6 had, along with the marketplace, blown away the little morals and order that had set their roots down on this land.

If Inukashi set his dogs on them, the people would disperse temporarily. But what would happen afterwards? He would be surrounded and lynched. People didn't forgive people who tried to monopolize living necessities amidst destruction and confusion. If they allowed it to happen, their own portion would not come around. There was no way they would tolerate anyone who endangered their own lives. The kind of people who did were not to be tolerated.

Inukashi knew very well how violent someone could become if cornered. It was no different from a hungry wolf. But Inukashi also knew that once the confusion settled, order would be restored as well, at least to the minimal level. Order existed even within wolf packs.

But with all that aside, today's work was done. He would have to be satisfied with what he had managed to reap from the meat shop. It was idiotic to risk getting lynched for instant gratification.

Knowing when to make a clean break was also a skill you needed to have in order to survive here.

"A-bah," the baby sputtered, stretching its hands toward him. Its soft palms touched his cheek. Perhaps it wanted milk: the baby puckered its lips and started making suckling sounds. It had been brought up more or less with care, and was not pitifully thin. For a baby in the West Block, this was a rarity.

He felt a definite warmth and weight in his arms as he held the baby. Inukashi sighed, and gazed at it. He had taken it in his arms. They had made eye contact. He had felt this warmth and weight in his arms, and now there was no going back.

*Oh, geez.*

He wanted to throw his head back and cry anguish into the heavens.

*What am I gonna do with even more baggage? What the hell am I gonna do?*

Clouds began to cover the sky above him. The wind grew even more chilly.

*What am I gonna do, Shion?*

The dog at his feet gave a great swing of its tail, as if to encourage him.

Inukashi had no experience with raising babies. But as for puppies, he had raised a countless number of them. He told himself he would manage it somehow.

Humans and dogs weren't all that different.

From his experience, Inukashi felt it was true. The only difference between them was whether one had two legs or four legs, whether one had a tail or not.

*I've taken it on myself to do it. I'll raise it.*

He had picked it up in his arms, and carried it home—there was no abandoning the baby now. He would raise it, in his own way. If he was lucky, it would grow. If it wasn't... well, that was not much to worry about. It would only die.

Two of his dogs had given birth out of season. Births in the wrong time of the year were often stillborn. Each dog had four puppies, and half the litter of each had already been dead when they came out of the mother.

"Well, hang in there, little guy. It's up to how lucky you are, whether you'll live or not. If you're unlucky, then don't blame me. You got God to—no, you got Shion to thank for that. Got it?"

He laid the baby down beside a female dog with black fur, so that it nestled against the dog's belly. The mother dog, which had lost its puppies recently, gave a great sigh as it lay on the ground. The baby was looking up at Inukashi wide-eyed.

They were eyes like a lake surface at nighttime. They reflected nothing, but they looked like they would suck everything in. Inukashi averted his gaze, and swiftly backed away. He had to go over what he had collected today. Inukashi was soon engrossed in the silver coins that were piled on his table.

It was more than he had expected. He still regretted that he hadn't gotten any clothes or a pot, but he had no complaints with this amount of profit.

*One, two, three... that meat shop geezer, I can see how greedy he really was, look how much he's saved up. Don't worry, I'm in charge of all of it now. You have nothing to worry about in your afterlife.*

When he had the silver coins between his fingers, shining dully, he couldn't help but grin. *I sure wish that baby came with his own pouch of money.*

*But—he thought, as he clenched the coin in his fist. I've sure gone soft.*

He was sighing again. He sighed, and lapsed into thought. *Why? Why did I bring it here?*

Inukashi swept up the coat that had been flung onto the floor. It was Shion's coat. He had heard the rough gist of things from the dog. Shion had wrapped the baby in his coat, and left it in the dog's care. Or, rather, he had left it in Inukashi's care.



*Inukashi, please take care of him.*

Even before hearing it from the dog, as soon as the baby had gazed at him, Shion's voice had echoed in his head.

*Inukashi, please take care of him.*

He could almost see the figure of the white-haired boy in the midst of the Hunt, in the midst of utter chaos in the market, hiding the baby underneath the rubble. That was why Inukashi could not resist. He could not abandon what Shion had left him at the border of his own life and death. If Inukashi let this baby die, then Shion...

*Shion probably wouldn't blame me, he thought. He would only be crestfallen. The purple of his eyes would deepen, and a heavy sorrow would cross his face. Seeing him like that pained Inukashi. I don't... want that to happen.*

He drew a breath. The silver coin rolled out of his hand onto the table. *Hey, he scolded himself sharply. Are you supposing you can see them again? See them alive?*

His own self answered.

*No, I... no, of course not.*

Yeah. It's impossible. Right? As impossible as waking up tomorrow morning to see the whole ruins in full bloom.

*Yeah... you're right... that might be true, but....*

But? Hey, what're you thinking? This is the Hunt we're talking about. You saw the mountain of rubble, right? How can you be sure that Shion and Nezumi are buried somewhere in there? Well, I can't imagine them being buried so easily if Nezumi's around. The meat shop geezer is the one who got flattened under his own house, haha. But still—if they escaped being buried alive, then what? They probably got rounded up and carted off. To the Correctional Facility.

*Taken to the... Correctional Facility.*

Yeah. Correctional Facility. Once you get through the gates, you can never get out again. They passed through those gates of death, man. They've gone to hell. They won't come back. There's no way they could. They'll never appear in front of you again.

Inukashi bit his lip. He thumped his chest hard, with his fist.

People who went through the gates of death never returned to the world of life. He knew. Of course he knew.

His mind knew. But this—this here, refused to comply.

He opened his palm now, and rubbed his thin chest.

His heart was raising an objection. It was screaming that it wasn't convinced.

They had said so many times. *We're going to hell, but we'll come back alive.* Nezumi with Nezumi's own ways, and Shion with his own, they had said they would definitely return. Yes, and—and besides, Nezumi had promised.

*If you're overcome with unbearable pain one day, I promise I'll always rush to your side. No matter where you are, I'll deliver a song to your soul.*

Inukashi couldn't forget his serious tone as he had whispered those words. Although he resented it heartily, those words had supported him. If he could be wrapped by that beautiful singing voice, all suffering would disappear, and the peaceful death he had always hoped for would come. To be unfearing of death meant he could be unfearing of life. Thanks to Nezumi,

Inukashi was able to be relatively unafraid of life or death.

*He made a promise. I'm gonna believe it.*

One was an airheaded little boy, and the other was a highly dangerous fraud, but neither of them ever went back on their word.

They would come home.

He stood up, and turned around. He realized it had been unusually quiet behind him.

The baby had brought its lips to the dog's nipple, and was suckling. The black dog raised its head and was staring curiously at the human child clinging onto its nipple.

"Wow," Inukashi mused. He had to admit he was surprised. "You're a tough one."

He had not expected the baby to be able to feed from a dog so well. But it had been one to escape the carnage of the Hunt: perhaps it was blessed with a strong and good fortune.

Fate decided between life or death. God presided over it. But the ability to cling to life and snatch it came from human power.

"Well, good luck giving life a try." Inukashi nudged the baby's bottom with his toe. He hadn't kicked it. He had really only poked at it as if to tickle it. But the baby began to cry. It flailed its limbs, and broke into sobbing. And soon, that turned into a full-out wailing.

"Huh? Hey hey, what's wrong?" Inukashi hastily picked it up in his arms, and the crying instantly stopped. "Don't cry, stupid. I still got money to count. I'm busy. I have no time to be playing with you."

He put the baby down, and it instantly erupted into tears again. When he picked it back up, it stopped, and even smiled.

So Inukashi had to roam about the room with the baby in his arms. The baby remained in a splendidly good mood as long as it was being held. Eventually, it began to lapse into quiet breaths as it fell asleep in Inukashi's arms.

He gently laid the baby down on a blanket, and covered it with Shion's coat. The tan-coloured dog nestled alongside it. After a moment of hesitation, the black female dog also sprawled out beside the baby, as if to hold it to its belly.

*What's up with him? He's just a kid, and the dogs are already starting to like him.*

The dogs around Inukashi were midway between wild and domesticated. They lived in the world of humans alongside them, but they did not trust humans. They were apprehensive, fearful, and even attacked humans at times. They were cautious and aggressive. It was highly unlikely for them to accept any human apart from Inukashi so easily. Sure, it was a defenseless baby, but Inukashi couldn't believe that they had taken it under their wing so promptly. He had even been prepared for the baby to receive two, three bites at least....

*Geez, what's up with this kid? Maybe he really has some of Shion's blood in him. Don't tell me he's gonna grow up to be an airhead like him, too.*

It was kind of funny when he tried to imagine it, and he laughed. But now, the baby had no fear of freezing. It had filled its belly, and was now able to sleep, free of the cold. It was something to be thankful for. For Inukashi, this would have been the most fortunate circumstances he could ever be in, But yet the baby still cried. Whatever it was that made him unhappy, made him start crying not even five minutes after being laid down. If he carried it, it stopped crying and went to sleep; if he put it down, it woke up and cried. This repeated itself. Counting money was the last thing he could do.

"You idiot. I'm the one that wants to cry here. If you don't knock it off soon, I'm gonna throw you in a pot and make you into dog food," he griped. It had apparently not gotten across to the baby, for it squealed and giggled enthusiastically, its voice bouncing off the walls.

*If this was Nezumi, he'd probably sing it a gentle lullaby,* he thought. A super-special one that would lull the baby into a deep sleep that would not make him wake until morning.

Inukashi didn't know a single lullaby. Raised by dogs, only thing that lingered in his ears was the sound of the wind and the growling of the dogs. Both of them stirred unsettling feelings rather than invite sleep.

*Could I get my hands on food tomorrow?*

*Could I avoid freezing to death tomorrow?*

*Could I avoid getting beaten up too badly tomorrow?*

*Could I still be alive tomorrow?*

The wind brought snow, and growling brought news of danger. It had always been like that.

Danger, danger. Be careful. Don't let your guard down for even a second. See, that vulnerable moment could cost you your life. Look out, it's dangerous. Look out, be careful.

The dogs and the wind had always whispered those words. No one ever sang to him, told him, *relax and rest, sleep peacefully.*

Inukashi stopped pacing, and rocked the baby in his arms.

*When I see Nezumi next time, I'll request a lullaby for this baby. Of course, for free. This kid is Shion's business anyway, he wouldn't be able to say no.*

*I'd want to hear it too,* he thought. *I'd want to hear Nezumi sing a lullaby, even just once.*

He touched the baby's cheek. It felt plump. It wasn't hard or taut, and had a smooth elasticity. It was comforting to the touch.

*Might be tasty to eat.*

The thought crossed his mind, half-serious. His stomach, empty save for leftover food, contracted, squealing insistently. His mouth watered. In the end, it was meat over lullabies. He needed a full stomach more than sleep. He swallowed his saliva.

*Geez, am I hungry.*

The air shifted. The air that surrounded the ruins hummed. The barking of dogs resounded throughout.

*Who is it?*

Someone was coming. The dogs lying down outside were now raising their voices in apprehension. But there was nothing to be agitated about. The barking of the dogs, both large and small, was not overly wrung in alarm or threat.

It was not an enemy. No stranger had wandered in; no thief had snuck in either. It was someone unwelcome, but of low risk.

Inukashi raised his face and quivered his nose. He caught the smell of alcohol. At the same time, a puppy with a torn right ear burst into the room. It yapped insistently, reporting who the visitor was. Inukashi gave a light wave of his hand to shut it up. See, dogs were great. You told them to shut up, and they did.

"I know, I know. I could smell it from here. The alcoholic old man, yeah?"

His eyes fell on the coins sitting on his table.

"Oh, crap." He shoved the baby onto the dog, and hurriedly shovelled the coins into a bag. The moment he stuffed the bag into his pant pocket, he heard footsteps clambering up the stairs.

The door burst open violently.

"Will you knock, at least?" Inukashi seated himself in a chair, and scowled exaggeratedly. "What if I was changing?"

"How many—times—in your life—do you ever— change your clothes?" Rikiga panted heavily, his shoulders rising and falling with every breath. He leaned against the wall.

"Hey old man, you better not run around so much. Your lungs are probably half-melted from the booze. Watch you don't suffocate and die."

Rikiga thrust his right hand out, still gasping.

"What? You want a handshake?" Inukashi said.

"Get me a... glass of water."

"One copper coin."

"*What?*"

"You want something to drink, you trade me one copper coin for it."

"Inukashi... you little..."

"Hey, this is a ruins. I don't have any running water like your place, old man. I draw the water from the stream. Precious stuff. One copper, no change."

Rikiga clicked his tongue. His forehead was damp with sweat, despite the biting cold. He must have been in a great hurry, for his breathing took a while to return to normal. Wheezing raggedly, Rikiga sank into a chair, and quipped in a sarcastic voice:

"You're not... charging for seating, are you?"

"This time it's on the house. So, on what visiting business, *sir*?"

"So the Hunt has actually come, huh."

"Uh-huh."

"Shion's been taken away."

"Looks like it."

"I'm... worried, so worried... I can't sit or stand still."

"So that's why you decided to run a marathon here? Kudos to you."

Rikiga's fist pounded the table. A copper coin that Inukashi had forgotten to put away fell to the floor and rolled. He stopped it with his foot, and picked it up.

"No matter how much you worry, it isn't gonna do any good, old man. Besides, things just went according to plan, didn't they? They managed to slip into the Correctional Facility, just as they wanted. We should congratulate them."

He blew on the copper coin, and shined it with his sleeve. "If they make it out alive, it'd be a cause for celebration."

A deep sigh escaped from Rikiga's stubbly mouth. It stank of alcohol.

"Shion... poor boy... when I imagine what horrible things he must be going through right now... a good boy, such a good boy... please be safe."

"Old man."

"What?"

"Not that I really care or anything, but—aren't you forgetting something?"

"Forgetting? What?"

"Shion didn't sneak into the Correctional Facility alone. Well, they didn't 'sneak in' really... more like 'captured'," he added as an afterthought. "But anyway, he's not alone. He's got a partner. Aren't you worried about him?"

Rikiga's face contorted. If someone were to thrust a rotting corpse under his nose, his face would probably not be as twisted as it was now. It was an expression of blatant dislike.

"Are you talking about Eve? I don't care about him. It'd be a load off my chest if he could get himself caught in a mouse trap while he's at it."

"I do agree," Inukashi said amiably. "Just imagining Nezumi flailing around in a mouse-trap box makes me giddy. But you were his fan, old man. I heard you used to go see him at the playhouse all the time."

Rikiga sniffed dismissively, and turned aside.

"I was being tricked. Who could imagine that personality from a face like that, a voice like that? Goodness, he's as deceitful as a female fox."

"He's a guy."

"Either way, it doesn't change the fact that he's a trickster fox demon."

*Fox demon, huh. That's a good description. More suitable for him than Rat, though he's probably closer to a wolf than a fox.*

Inukashi shrugged, and closed one eye. "Shion's got a demon fox with him, then. He'll be fine."

Rikiga leaned forward and grabbed Inukashi's arm. Inukashi almost let out a cry: Rikiga's grip was that strong. He instinctively clapped a hand over his pocket. He felt like silver was going to be stolen from him.

"Really?" Rikiga had his bloodshot eyes open wide. "You really think so?"

"Th-Think what? Holy crap, old man, that hurts. Leggo of me."

"You really think Shion is okay?"

"How the hell should I know?" He withdrew his arm. Rikiga began mumbling to himself.

"Eve is a knave, a trickster, a fraud, but he's there when you need him."

"Are you insulting him or complimenting him?"

Rikiga ignored him, and continued mumbling.

"Yeah. I can count on him. Eve would probably protect Shion just fine. Am I right, Inukashi?"

"I told you, I dunno." He closed his mouth, and directed his gaze at the ceiling.

Nezumi was a knave, a trickster, a fraud, no mistake, and that was putting it mildly. But you could count on him in any situation too, to put it mildly. This was also no mistake. Nezumi was more cunning and cautious than anyone Inukashi knew. He was also level-headed, nimble, and tough. He was like a wolf that didn't conform to a pack.

He had never seen a real wolf before. But he had heard about them from his mother.

*They're terrifying creatures. They don't open their hearts to humans like we dogs. Never. They would rather die than be taken care of by a human. They're prideful. But they're also treacherous and always on the prowl for a profit. They're greedy and ruthless. They don't carry a tiny bit of sympathy in their hearts. That's the difference between dogs and wolves. Now you listen, you're a dog. You're not a*

*human, or a wolf. You're a dog. Don't you forget that.*

A prideful and heartless creature. In Inukashi's mind, the image of the wolf he'd been told about so many times overlapped perfectly with that of Nezumi. He was dangerous if he turned against you. But as a guard, he was cut out for the job.

If Nezumi seriously tried to defend Shion, maybe they would be able to return from the Correctional Facility alive. It was a slim chance, but it wasn't zero.

Nezumi would probably defend Shion seriously, and with all he had. He would. As long as Shion didn't trip him up, they would probably return alive like they'd promised.

Inukashi's heart grew calm. *Yeah. Yeah, that's right*, he told himself.

Evidently reading something from Inukashi's expression, Rikiga adjusted himself in his chair, and nodded resolutely.

"If that's the case, then we should get moving as well."

"Huh? If what's the case?"

"We have to help them from the outside, so Shion can come home. What else?"

"When did we decide that? I'm staying outta this," Inukashi said hastily. "I already agreed to be bait once. I've contributed way more than my share."

"You're acting like you did volunteer work," scoffed Rikiga. "You did receive your pay for that, if I'm not mistaken."

"That doesn't even amount to pocket money. Whatever. I have no plans of having anything to do with them or the Correctional Facility again. None. Zip, I tell ya."

"You're not going to help Shion?"

"Lemme tell you something, old man. I don't got any debts or favours to repay to that airhead. We're not friends, or brothers, or relatives, or a parent and kid."

"But he's part of our group."

"Our group?" Inukashi drew his chin back. He had not expected to hear the words "our group" from the kind of alcohol-pickled example of a corrupted man who published lewd magazines and made his money off of selling women's bodies. What a surprise.

Group mates?

"We're all in it together. Am I wrong?"

Wrong he most certainly was. *In it together?* The tip of his nose tensed. Inukashi remained silent, not knowing whether he should laugh or be exasperated. Rikiga, on the other hand, seemed to turn more eloquent by the minute.

"Shion is part of our group. Nobody could ever replace him. Come on, Inukashi, you like him too, don't you?"

"Not—well—I don't hate him."

"He's like an angel. Untainted. You can't find people as pure as those just anywhere."

"Uh-huh, is that so?" Inukashi said flatly. "So sorry, for being the *tainted* one in your company."

"Nobody said you were tainted. See, Shion would never twist people's words around like that. He accepts things openly, honestly, and as they are. His heart is rooted in the same place as his mother. Oh, Karan, I wonder what she's doing now," Rikiga said forlornly. "What if she's fallen ill from worrying about her son?"

"Who's Karan? Aren't we talking about Shion here? Besides, old man, all you've been

talking about so far is Shion-this and Shion-that. What about Nezumi? If Shion's part of our group, then Nezumi has to be too, doesn't he?"

"Eve, part of us? Give me a break. I'd rather welcome a slug into my extended family than be in the same group as a deceitful fox like him."

"You sure treat him differently from Shion, huh." Inukashi glanced up into Rikiga's liquor-flushed face. *Pure and angelic? Is this old man really serious about that?*

Just like how he didn't know what Nezumi really was, he didn't know what lay inside Shion either. If he peeled off a layer, what would this angelic and pure figure reveal? Maybe he would be more horrendous and fierce than he ever expected. Maybe within Shion, there existed some dark pit of truth that even Nezumi feared.

Rikiga favoured Shion too much. Angel? That was absurd. People could become devils, but never angels. Besides, sometimes angels could be much more brutal than devils. A man like Rikiga, who was thoroughly versed in wiles through his life experience, should know best.

*It stinks.*

There was a stench, other than alcohol. But it wasn't a smell Inukashi disliked. He preferred the smell of rotting meat over the perfume of flowers.

Catching Inukashi's gaze, Rikiga smiled vaguely.

"So selfless, don't you think Inukashi?"

"Who? Me?"

"Please tell me where the hell I can find a trait like 'selfless' inside you. I was talking about Shion. He infiltrated the Correctional Facility, risking his own life, to save his friend. He's putting his life on the line for someone else."

"Around these parts, we call those kinds of people Huge Idiots."

"Inukashi, knock it off. If we don't help them out, who will? Shion believes in us, and he's waiting for our help."

"Old man."

"Hm?"

"I can help you, depending on the event and circumstance."

"Now that's more like it, Dogkeeper of the Ruins. Admirable decision."

"Stop buttering me up, and let's hear your real story."

"Real story?"

"Your aim, old man. What're you after in the Correctional Facility?"

Rikiga blinked.

"What am I after... what're you talking about? I just wanted to help Shion, that was the only—"

"How much profit is it gonna make you?" Still holding his pocket with his hand, Inukashi leaned forward. In response, Rikiga slid back, chair and all.

"Geez, look at you. Every other word out of your mouth is 'profit'. Money, money, money. Don't you have anything else to think about?"

"Lots. My brain is always going full-throttle. And you too, old man. Your gears are still turning in there, your greed is still going strong. The only thing that's gotten sluggish is probably the blood in your veins, from the alcohol. There's no way you'd stick your hands into a job that didn't carry profits, am I right, old man? And we're talking against the Correctional

Facility, a direct affiliate of No. 6's Security Bureau. Enemies don't get any more dangerous than that. Both you and I helped Nezumi sneak in, either because we were tricked or because we got talked into it. But this is where it ends, usually. We get however much money we deserve for that job, and go back to our own nests. Whatever happens afterwards isn't any of our business... right? That's usually how it is."

"Inukashi, listen—"

"But this time, old man, you're crawling out of your nest on your own, even saying you wanna stick your nose into dangerous territory. For Shion? Of course not. I'd never believe it. If my dogs started baa-ing like sheep, I'd believe that over you."

"Like I said, it's—"

Inukashi waved his hand impatiently. He was sick of excuses and justifications. He found himself a little irritated. More and more he felt like he had had enough of wasting words, trying to make excuses to each other. He was beyond weary of coating his honest words with lies, and trying to read the other's intentions.

*At the very least...*

Inukashi inhaled through his nose. The frigid air of the room, which had no heater, coursed through his body.

*At least those two never made excuses to each other.*

He didn't think Nezumi and Shion had bared all to each other. Nezumi, especially, probably hadn't. But they never made excuses to each other. They didn't try to manipulate each other, or shroud their honest opinions. They lived for each other, not out of give-and-take, nor greed, nor calculation.

Inukashi had never encountered that sort of relationship. There were mothers who threw away their lives for their children. He knew a girl who had sold her body to support her family. But *those two* weren't in such a sacrificial relationship. One of them didn't have to destroy himself for the other to be saved.

Friendship, love, group mentality, pity, sympathy, empathy—it didn't matter what name it was given, but none of them seemed to fit their relationship.

Both could live for the other, without the give-and-take, without greed, without calculation, without sacrifice. Perhaps he was tired. Inukashi found himself envying that relationship—just a little.

He inhaled again.

*But I don't have to be jealous of them. I've got my dogs. Humans will always betray you one day. They'll never give back to you with their whole body and soul, like dogs do. Dogs are enough for me.*

"Fine." Rikiga's shoulders shook. A smug smile spread across his lips. What a hideous grin it was. He committed almost any crime for money. He had nothing against tricking, threatening, or swindling people.

*Yeah, that face is more like it. The day you put on some mask of a kind-hearted good Samaritan is the day I stop talking to you.*

"You know, Inukashi, I don't think there's much time left."

"For you? Oh, really? What a shame. I thought so too. The alcohol's poisoned you, old man. If you've got anything to leave behind, give it to me before it's too late."

"Who said I was talking about myself? I was talking about No. 6."



"No. 6?"

"Yeah. The oh-so-beautiful Almighty Holy City."

"Not much time left? Give me the details."

Rikiga's grin widened. *Got you biting the bait*, his smile said. There were times when you had to swallow the bait, even if you could see the hook. It was bait that was too attractive to ignore.

"Is there something strange happening in No. 6?"

"Yeah. I've been seeing strange movements around the city that are really standing out."

It looked like Rikiga was serious about his talk: the smile vanished from his face, and the sarcasm disappeared from his voice. "First: there have been several cases of a strange disease reported inside the city. Now, what it is, or whether it's contagious, we don't know yet. But you remember Fura saying this, don't you? The Correctional Facility, that other facility that's just been built, and the Health and Hygiene Bureau are connected. Health and Hygiene Bureau, you hear? Now what does it do?"

"It monitors the health and manages treatment of all citizens..."

"Exactly. Which means now, that strange disease is also connected to the Correctional Facility too. You understand what I mean so far, right?"

"More or less. I got a good earful during that farce we did."

"Apparently, Shion's friend was pretty much kidnapped and taken to the Correctional Facility. And this is still unconfirmed information, but... someone who was involved in the construction of the facility inside the Correctional Facility supposedly died a sudden death. He was a resident of the city, of course."

"Was he killed?"

"Not quite sure about that. But it reeks of death, and it's coming from the city. And then we have the acoustic shockwaves. Went all-out, didn't they? One blast, and the whole market's gone. They used a brand-new weapon to blow up barracks. That's like eating leftovers on a silver platter."

"Good simile. It just screams education."

"Why, thank you," Rikiga said unconcernedly. "So that means the city was developing weapons in secret, which is prohibited by the Babylon Treaty. And now they've started using it openly in public. The Hunt that happened this time was probably to test-drive their new weapon."

Inukashi swung his neck around in a wide circle.

Rikiga had run all the way here, out of breath, worried about Shion—or feigning it—but had managed to collect information about the Hunt, and investigated the remains of the destruction on the way. Maybe he had rifled through the debris and picked out things that might make him money while he was at it.

*You can't trust this guy around anything, the tough cookie*, Inukashi snickered silently in his mind.

"Don't you think it's been hectic in there lately?" Rikiga continued. "And too many people are dying. Not in the West Block, either—in No. 6, the ideal city, the Holy City, as it's been paraded as. I've had a long relationship with that city. It always used to perch prim and composed, never ruffling its demeanour as a utopia. But it reeks these days. I've never smelled

death come from it so freely, without restraint. Of course, there have been people killed, people committing suicide, but..."

"Not this blatantly."

"Yeah. Every death they put under wraps, and disposed of it as a calm and peaceful death. Do you know about the Twilight Cottage?"

"Whas' that?"

"Outwardly it's a facility for palliative care. A hospice, you might call it. Ill patients who don't have long to live—mostly the elderly—have all suffering removed, and can die a peaceful death, not much different from a deep sleep. That's what they say the Twilight Cottage is for."

Inukashi purred in his throat. He felt like he would salivate. A death not much different from sleep: it was something he'd wished for, harder than anything. He would be embraced in softness, warmth, and he would softly close his eyes. He would never wake up. His heart would slowly stop beating, and his breathing would grow few and far between. But his brain would keep dreaming. Sleep would gently coast over to death. He would live his last without being shut into darkness. He would be smiling.

Rikiga peered into Inukashi's eyes.

"Geez, don't make those begging eyes. You're sure easy to understand. What I was talking about was the Twilight Cottage as it's publicized by the authorities."

"—which means?"

"Things are different, apparently."

"Different?"

"The Twilight Cottage isn't a hospice; it's an execution grounds."

"Execution grounds? Does that even exist inside the Holy City?"

"Of course, it's nothing like the Correctional Facility. It's not as obvious... all the patients brought to the Twilight Cottage don't live out their lives and die a natural death... as soon as they've been transported, they're drugged, put to sleep, and—"

Perhaps even Rikiga felt resistance towards saying it out loud; he only twitched his mouth, and then gave a long sigh.

"But why do they do that to the citizens? What for?"

"Because they're useless," Rikiga said promptly, as if he had been expecting Inukashi's question. "No. 6 is that kind of city. It's ruthless against people who are useless to it. If that person's only got his death to wait for, then why not let him go quickly and easily with drugs? Less waste that way. That's how they think."

Inukashi shuddered. He was getting goosebumps.

He had seen his share of grisly deaths. He had seen so many, the fingers on both his hands weren't enough, even if he counted over them twice. He had committed to his heart, and resigned himself to the fact that in the West Block, you had to accept many different kinds of deaths. That life and death were different within the walls and outside. But did grisly deaths pervade inside the walls just like they did outside?

"Old man, who'd you hear that from?"

"My customers. Fura isn't the only one who sneaks out here from No. 6 in search of our ladies. The tight restrictions they're making these days is enough to put me out of business now, but I've still got a couple returning customers. Among them, some work at a direct affiliate of

the city, though not in a position as high as Fura's. Those guys babble to the girls. Spill the beans. Why do you think?"

"Why—well—because they feel talkative after finishing, or something..." Inukashi said awkwardly.

"No, no. It's because they don't think of the West Block's prostitutes as humans. They don't even think that the girls might have brains and hearts like they do. They don't think the girls can think, or can feel sadness in their hearts. So they spill the beans. To them, it's probably like talking to a rock lying on the road. That's why they can go on divulging workplace secrets. Humans are talkative animals; they can't shut up. 'I can't talk inside the city, so why not talk to the prostitutes in the West Block? They probably can't even understand language anyway.' That's what they think. But those girls listen. Sometimes they even flatter the guys, in order to draw out more."

"And you take that information and sell it, or use it to threaten people to make money, huh, old man."

"Well, you have a mix of good and bad information. Most of it is useless. But my customers from No. 6 these days are more talkative than ever. Before, it was mostly bragging or exaggerated lies... but now we have complaints, discontent... uncertainty. All we're getting are stories about uncertainty. See, Inukashi, No. 6 is no utopia. It's only trying to keep a skilful hold over its citizens to dominate them. And that's starting to get obvious. It's starting to fray at the seams. Those citizens are starting to get suffocated in that interior. They're living in the ideal city, and yet, they can't even breathe. And they've started to wonder why. I've heard of a customer who lay in bed all night, mumbling 'why? Why do you think this is?'. "

"I see." Inukashi could finally see where this was going. *So that's how it is.* "Strange illnesses, the new equipment at the Correctional Facility, all that information leakage, and the mounting complaints, dissatisfaction, uncertainty. You're saying gas is building up within the walls of No. 6?"

"Yeah, gas. It might still be thin now, but what happens when the density increases?" Rikiga spread the fingers of both his hands, making a bursting gesture.

"Explode? You're saying No. 6 is gonna collapse from the inside?"

"If everything goes as planned. Before the city-state of No. 6 wields overwhelming military force—before it can dominate over the world and its citizens with its power, we have to set the gas alight. And the Correctional Facility is where we'll start. Most of the mysteries are focused on that place. We try prodding it for information. Aren't you excited to find out what we'll find?"

"—and that's what Nezumi said."

"Idiot. How could a kid like him come up with an advanced theory like this?"

"Advanced, indeed. No alcoholic brain would be able to come up with that. What happened to the talk about making money, huh? Is the treasure gonna get blown up along with it, and come raining down on our heads?"

"It won't come raining down. We have to dig it up."

"Dig?"

"There's supposedly a secret safe in the basement of the Correctional Facility."

"Secret safe? In that blank space?"

"I don't have bearings on the exact location. But rumour says the head honchos of No. 6 have hidden a total of several tens of thousands of tonnes of solid gold bullion."

"Gold... gold bullion, didja say?"

"Ten of thousands of tonnes of gold bullion. They might be bars, I don't know. So? Don't you feel blinded just imagining that brilliance?"

"But... I mean, where did you get that information?"

"From a girl, of course. A red-headed one named Sulu, who has a returning customer who works at the Finance Bureau. Quite pretty."

Inukashi didn't care about the red-headed woman. His interest was piqued many times more by the gold bullion than human flesh.

"So you got it from her."

"Yeah. It was a bed-time story, though, so I'm not one-hundred percent sure about its credibility. But it's plausible, isn't it? A mountain of gold in a place where infiltration and escape is impossible. Safer for hiding than anywhere else. Pretty believable, I would say."

"Are we gonna be able to get it?"

"We *will* get it. Once No. 6 begins to crumble, the whole place will be chaos. If we take advantage of it... what do you think?"

Inukashi growled softly. It sounded like a dream. Should he simply laugh and call it a stupid story, or play along with this fairy tale, just for the sake of it?

"Does Nezumi plan to destroy the Correctional Facility?"

"Eve? He might do it. He can't create much, but he can sure destroy. No, why don't we have him do it? Let's have him make a spectacle out of it."

The Correctional Facility—the very embodiment of fear itself—would crumble. Inukashi's heart danced just imagining its destruction unfold.

The collapsing Correctional Facility and the glittering mounds of gold. He would receive two of the best compensation he could ever get, in these two hands. Perhaps it was worth the challenge. However—

Inukashi licked his lips. He inhaled, filling his nostrils with the odour of dogs that permeated the room.

However, if he had to invest his own life in this capital, he would decline. He would rather remain in the ruins starving, but living, with his dogs, rather than die buried in gold.

"What do I needa do? If it's anything risky, I'm not in."

"I know, I know. I wouldn't put you in danger. I just need your connections."

"Connections?"

"There's a man who passes on leftover food to you from the Correctional Facility, am I right?"

Inukashi narrowed his eyes, and clenched his jaw lightly. Behind the drink-drowned middle-aged man, Nezumi was wearing his signature ironic smile. He could see it.

*Good job, Nezumi. You softened this tough cookie up. Nice cooking skills.*

Many different feelings and desires were mingling, melting, and writhing within Rikiga: genuine compassion for Shion, destructive impulses, a strong desire to see No. 6 crumble before his eyes; and more than anything, an attachment for gold bullion. Nezumi had used this to his advantage. He had very artfully used this in his favour, had given orders to him, and was

controlling him this way. It was quite something. But it was also possible that Rikiga was fully aware that he was being controlled, and had agreed to play the marionette for Shion and for gold bullion; for greed and love.

Inukashi found himself sighing. They were like a raccoon dog and fox<sup>1</sup> trying to out-trick each other. Suddenly he began to miss Shion. He was a mystery, sure, but he was a hundred times better than an old raccoon dog and demon fox. Inukashi missed those awkward, naive actions of his; his earnest and foolishly straightforward way of saying things; his carefree smile. He wanted to see Shion.

"You're receiving a substantial amount of leftovers, aren't you? That route hasn't been cut off, has it?"

"No." It wasn't cut off yet. The man who was in charge of waste disposal not only resold leftovers, but also the clothes and belongings of prisoners through secret routes. He had even once complained that he was assigned to dispose of dead bodies. It was the department where all of the facility's garbage and corpses were gathered. It was located inside the Correctional Facility, and it was regarded with the least importance, and for that reason the management was also lax. But it would probably be impossible to use him as a foothold to sneak into the Facility, much less get back out of it. The man had said he was not allowed even a single step inside the Facility from the waste disposal site. The door that led inside simply didn't open.

"Would he be useful at all...?" Inukashi said dubiously.

"He will be. Every knife, no matter how dull, has its uses."

"Did Nezumi say that too?"

"Who cares? You clearly have something against Nezumi, and it's over the top. Look, Inukashi, keep the line open with that man. It'll come in handy. If you can, get him wrapped around your finger."

"Got it." *What was his name again?* The man had a thin, long face with drooping eyebrows, and sighed a lot. He cared about his family—and he had complained that he wasn't even allowed to tell them that he was working at the Correctional Facility, and that he would be instantly fired if he did. 'It gets you down, really, not even being able to tell your own daughter what you do for a job,' he had said. Daughter? Oh yes, he had one daughter. He had also said that a baby was coming soon... and he was in need of money. He wanted a good amount to sustain his family—*yeah, it might not be that hard to soften him up.*

"I need money. You gonna set me up with some, right, old man?"

"I know, I know. I won't force you to dig into the savings that are loading your pocket down right now." Rikiga scratched his chin, and grinned. "Going after the meat shop man's savings, huh? You've got a sharp eye. I have renewed admiration for you, Inukashi."

"Same for you. Who woulda known you'd find about it so fast? Pretty amazing. I'm in awe."

*Geez, the raccoon dog. Nothing goes unnoticed when it comes to him.*

Inukashi had just shrugged when the baby began to cry. Rikiga stood up from his chair.

"What's that?"

"What's what?"

"That voice. It's a baby crying."

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1 In folklore, raccoon dogs and foxes are known to be tricksters.

"Huh? I don't hear anything," Inukashi said nonchalantly. "You having auditory hallucinations now, old man? My heart goes out to you."

After throwing a glance at Inukashi, Rikiga took big strides toward the dogs laying in a corner of the room. They instantly rose and began to growl menacingly at him.

"Inukashi, what's this?"

"My dogs."

"This crying one too, the one that's lodged in between the dogs? New breed? Because it has no tail."

The wailing renewed itself with even greater volume. Inukashi reluctantly picked the baby up in his arms. Rikiga shook his head.

"What did you pick it up for? Planning to sell it?"

"I didn't pick it up, it was thrust onto me," Inukashi said obstinately. "By your little angel."

"Shion?"

Inukashi gave a brief explanation. Rikiga nodded in assent with a solemn expression on his face.

"Sounds like something Shion would do. It probably came to him instantly to hide the baby. When his own life was in danger, too... he's a living angel."

"Angels don't thrust babies on other people. Geez, nice burden he's given me."

"Don't complain. Think of how Shion must have felt. The little guy's got a cute face. It's a boy, huh. What's his name?"

"Shionn."

"Huh?"

"He dumped the thing in my care, so he can have the same name too. Hey, old man, don't you think this kid's eyes look just like Shion's?"

"Hmm, now that you mention it, they're the same colour," Rikiga said thoughtfully. "And they're clear, like his. Beautiful eyes."

"Right? He's an angelic child. So take him home, will ya?" He proffered the baby in his arms. Rikiga backed away, shaking his head.

"No, sorry, I'm a bachelor."

"Well, so am I. But you've got tons of women with big boobs, old man."

"Yeah, but none of them can give breast milk. Here, on the other hand, you don't even need diapers because the dogs will lick the baby clean. They'll even warm him. You grew up like this too, didn't you? Brilliant childrearing environment... oh, I know, I'll get my hands on some powdered milk and deliver it to you."

"*Shion* left the baby, you know," Inukashi said pointedly.

"I'll get some soft and clean blankets for you, too. And not just one—two or three. Well, see you then, Inukashi. I'll come by again soon."

With a scramble of hurried footsteps, Rikiga all but sprinted out of the room. Apparently his knack for making speedy getaways hadn't deteriorated yet.

The baby smiled in Inukashi's arms. It grabbed at his long hair, and grinned happily.

"Hey Shionn, that hurts. Don't get carried away." Inukashi prodded the baby's nose. A wide grin spread over the tiny face. "You happy that you have a name now? You gotta stay alive

until Papa comes back, then, alright?"

A wind blew into the room. The sky was completely covered in grey clouds.

*Stay alive, Shion. Live to come pick this little guy up.*

As Inukashi turned his face up to the snow clouds drifting by, he found himself murmuring those words as if in prayer.

CHAPTER 4  
A Name For White Darkness

My elder brother is a cannibal!  
I'm brother to a cannibal.  
Even though I'm to be the victim of cannibalism, I'm *brother* to a cannibal all the same!

*-Lu Xun, Diary of a Madman*

*Shi-o-n.* She tried calling his name. Since being brought here, how many times had she called it? No matter how many times she did, her voice never reached him.

Safu let out a deep, deep breath. The sound of her own sigh reached her own ears very vividly. And it wasn't only her sighing: the faint sounds of her own body as she shifted, her heartbeat, and even the name she'd called out silently, all echoed back to her vividly with a clear outline. On the contrary, her eyesight was always vague and closed off, blankly white. It was like she was in a fog.

*Where am I?* She let her gaze roam about.

It was a white world, like she was seeing through layers and layers of lace curtains. A world enveloped in fog. When she first awoke, she had thought for a fleeting instant that she'd wandered into a deep forest. But she soon realized how different it was. The only thing here was the white darkness that closed off her vision. There were no birds chirping in the canopies; no bubbling brook, no swishing of the trees. There was no fragrance of flowers, nor the smell of dirt. It was odourless, soundless. Only the sounds of her own body and soul became clearer and clearer by the day.

*Inside a deep forest...*

Safu sighed again. She had walked through a forest with Shion once. It was a forest park in the centre of No. 6, however, so all animals and plants were minutely scrutinized and managed by human hands. 'I don't think a place like this should be called a forest,' Shion had said, and grimaced in clear dislike.

*Oh, I remember. How many years ago was it? I can remember it so clearly.*

Safu smiled. A feeling of happiness coursed through her body. It was very warm, soft, and comforting. Every time she thought of Shion, every time she revived the hours she spent with him, she could smile.

*I remember. I was beside him, and I was very happy. Shion, don't you think memories are amazing? The memories of being with you still bring me happiness. Yes, it's true. I haven't forgotten a single thing. Your tone of speech, your gaze, your gestures, your scent... I haven't forgotten anything.*

*You told me once, while we were walking through the beech-tree block of the Forest Park.*

"They call it a forest, but it's a place that's under human control. I don't feel right calling it a forest. I wish they would at least let us walk in the natural wood in the North Block. It's hard



to get permission, though."

"But this is your workplace too, isn't it?"

"That's why I can tell how much more it's being managed. I feel like nature should be more unpredictable— like something that surpasses human intelligence. Safu, don't you feel anything wrong with this?"

"Hmm. Well, I don't feel much resistance really," she had pondered aloud. "It's so beautiful here, after all." Safu let her gaze wander amidst the numerous branches that framed her above her head. The beech leaves were beginning to turn yellow. Catching the sunlight streaming down from the clear autumn sky, they looked almost like they were glowing.

"Oh, look!" she had said.

"Hm?"

"There was a squirrel. It went running along that branch."

"Beech trees bear fruit during this season, so animals come looking for food."

"Can you eat the fruit?"

"Yeah. They're nuts, actually. They usually grow in twos or threes, cased in a cupule."

"What's a cupule?"

"What you find in Mongolian oak fruits, and sawtooth oak... called, uh, acorns. What's attached to the bottom is part of it too."

"Oh, I think I know what you're talking about," Safu grinned. Shion smiled too. His smile, glowing in the sunlight that streamed through the beech trees, stung at her eyes. It stung in her heart. She had been smiling then, but she had also been about to burst into tears.

*We were walking alone together. But what did you talk about? Nuts? Cupules? Can't you be a little more tactful with your conversation? Did it ever occur to you to not say anything, and just snuggle up together, and feel each other's breathing and warmth? Shion, didn't you want to hold me? Didn't you want to love me?*

*I suppose you didn't. You looked like you enjoyed being with me, though. You laughed a lot, and you were more talkative than usual. Oh, yes yes. It was only once, but you even said so out loud.*

"It's fun being with you, Safu."

*I don't think you were lying. You're the kind of person who could never lie.*

*Shion, do you enjoy being with me?*

Yeah. A lot.

*Wouldn't it be nice if we could be together forever?*

Sure we could. Safu, you're my most important—

*You cared for me. You cherished me. But you didn't love me. You didn't feel the kind of desire for me that burned your body with yearning.*

Safu, you're my most important friend.

*You cruel person. So cruel, it's almost unbelievable. I don't think anyone could be as gentle, innocent, and cruel as you.*

*Shion, who are you in love with? Who do you burn with desire for?*

*Knowing you, you would probably love her singly, devotedly, and earnestly to the point of being absurd. You two would share both life and death, but go walking towards life instead of death.*

*Shion, who do you love? Who do you desire? Why can't it be me?*

The white curtains fluttered. A dark, hazy shadow appeared.

*It's that man again.*

*The man that smells like blood.*

"Hello, Safu." It looked like the man was raising his hand. "How do you feel?" Even his voice was dripping with blood. She didn't want to converse with him. She didn't want to speak. She didn't want him to come closer.

"It looks like you can hear me just fine. But oh dear, what is this response? Do you not like me, Safu?" The man chuckled. It was a muffled and dark voice. Only his voice was laughing. His heart was not. "There's nothing more sorrowful than being hated by you. I see, so you dislike my voice? Goodness, what a horrible response."

"I can't... see..."

"Oh! Is that an audio response? So you feel like talking to me now, Safu? I'm delighted to be able to have a conversation with you. Nothing could delight me more. Come on, give it another try."

"I can't... see. Just... white."

"You can't see? Oh, yes, you probably wouldn't be able to. You haven't completely recovered yet. Visual functions are the slowest to recover. Almost—you're almost there, Safu. In a little bit, those hazy things will become clear. Then you'll finally be able to look at yourself." The man laughed again. This time, it was from his heart. A high-pitched, somewhat vulgar laughter. It was chilling. Safu felt a foreboding shiver.

"Ah, have I made you feel unpleasant again? Hm? These waves—Safu, is it fear you're feeling rather than dislike?" The man drew nearer. His fingers touched her.

"Stop... go... away..."

"Safu, there is nothing to be afraid about. I don't intend to hurt you at all. You're beautiful. If I said you're the most beautiful person I know, it wouldn't be an overstatement. See, that's why I want to make you happy."

"Ha...ppy..."

"Yes. Happy. You won't feel any suffering or sadness, and you'll never contract a disease or have to groan in pain. You'll never age—no, in fact, death will not even exist. I want to give you that kind of happiness."

The man grew even more eloquent. The words streamed from his mouth as if he were possessed.

"Safu, you're beautiful," he said. "I'll confess this truthfully. I can't lie to beautiful people. Please don't be angry. At first, I only wanted an elite sample. That was why I had you come here. It didn't matter, as long as it was an elite. Oh, but a female one. Yes, a female... I needed a sample of a woman. But you were so beautiful, my heart was stolen. I couldn't treat you in the same way I did all the other samples. That's why you're right here, where I can reach you. See, Safu, soon you'll stop fearing me, and begin to feel grateful towards me."

"No... no... you're... scary..."

"Such an intelligent and beautiful person like you shouldn't whine like an obstinate child. Say, weren't you a student specializing in cognitive functions? I had the opportunity to read through the thesis you submitted for your application for exchange students. It was about the cortical column—on the functions of the finer structures within the cerebral cortex, am I right? 'The Cortical Column as Functional Module: The Mechanisms of Composite Information

Processing' it was called. It was quite interesting, though the development was rather awkward. But as a student thesis, it was top-notch."

Another layer of white curtain was swept aside. The man turned from a dark, shadowy figure to a human-shaped one.

"Oh? It looks like your eyesight is on the road to recovery as well. I'm getting good numbers. Not only are you beautiful and intelligent, you're also healthy. Supremely ideal. I'm very fortunate to have met someone as ideal as you."

*My eyesight is coming back? I can escape from this white world?*

No happiness welled up in Safu's heart. She felt no sense of freedom. On the contrary, she was terrified. She was afraid of when all the curtains had been drawn aside, when the fog cleared, what she would see, what she would have to see.

*Shion, I want to see you. I want to look at you. I want to hear your voice. You are the only one I seek.*

*Shion.*

—Safu.

She had heard him. She had heard his beloved voice calling her name.

"Hm? Hey, Safu. What's the matter? What is this response? Where did you receive this stimulus?"

*Shion.*

—Safu. Wait for me.

*Shion.*

—I'll get there. I'll save you.

*Shion....*

*Shion is nearby. He's close to me.*

A joyful thrill pierced through Safu's body. Hope was born. Hope was strength. It was a searing energy that came alive, and coursed through her whole body.

*Shion, you are my hope. I'm waiting for you. I'll wait for you to come to me.*

*Shion.*

He was grasping a handful of hair. It was long and durable. He couldn't tell what colour it was. He clutched at it like a lifeline, and climbed. He was climbing a mountain of people piled and folded on top of each other. He was going up, up, wedging his feet in, stepping on people's heads, buttocks, shoulders, and legs to move forward.

Some raised a groan the moment Shion's foot pressed down on them. He almost screamed. But it only stuck in his throat, and quivered there. A corner of his head ached dully, and the muscles of his back were tense and stiff as a board. Sweat glided down his back and chest. It drenched his whole body.

He had been prepared for it.

From the moment he decided to infiltrate the Correctional Facility, he had prepared himself. He had thought he did. But that resolve had been blown into smithereens. It had shattered, leaving no trace. After experiencing this hell, could he still say with certainty that he wanted to go into the Correctional Facility? He asked himself over and over inside his head, which only pounded with a dull pain.

*So what'll you do, Shion?*

I'll do it, of course.

But he couldn't say it with certainty. He couldn't even reassure himself.

What a fragile decision it was. What a half-hearted decision it had been.

He lifted his face, and gazed at Nezumi's figure. The gap between them seemed to be as wide as Heaven and Earth: Nezumi, who knew this hell and yet was still here; and he, who was gasping from the difficulty of his half-hearted and ignorant declaration. They were all too different.

It was no wonder if he was called a naive little boy, or scorned for it. It was true.

His foot slipped. As he lunged and reached forward, he felt something soft and malleable at his fingertips. He had grabbed someone's face, who was lying sideways. His index finger dug into the person's nostril. The pain in Shion's head grew worse. He felt dizzy. The strength was leaving his hands and legs. *Ah, I can't—*

"Shion!" He was grabbed by the wrist, and pulled up. "We're here."

"Here?"

"At the summit. Well, but that's only about half of the whole journey. But for the time being, congratulations on a job well done."

*The summit of a mountain of people, huh.*

"It's too bad we haven't brought lunch with us. Wanna take a break anyway?"

"A break... here?"

"If you know any other resting area, then there."

A tumult of groans rose up from below. They were, quite literally, rising up from where he was standing.

"There are... still people alive..." Shion said falteringly.

"Probably quite a few. The ones who fell first probably didn't make it. The ones that fell second, third, might've gotten away with broken bones. If they're lucky. See, Shion, we were lucky to be in the second group. If we were the first, we would've been smashed directly against the floor."

Shion remembered what he felt at the moment of the fall. The sensation of falling on top of human bodies. He had used the people in the first group as a cushion, those unlucky people who had been smashed to the floor, to lessen the impact of his own fall.

*Can I even call that fortunate?*

"You okay?" Nezumi said. "If you're nauseous, it'll feel better if you get it all out."

"Nezumi...."

"Hm?"

"I'm sorry."

"Huh? Why're you apologizing?"

Shion covered his face with his hands. The stench of sweat and blood, the groans of the dying people, enwrapped him whole. They dug into his flesh, and corroded his bones.

*This is all I can take. I can't bear any more.*

"I... can't do it." He could only make it this far. This was the best he could do. He couldn't move a single step more. If Nezumi hadn't grabbed his wrist back there, he would have tumbled back down the slope. He couldn't do anything alone.

"I'll... only ever become a hindrance to you."

"What're you bringing up old news for? You've always been a hindrance. You've never been anything more than that."

"Nezumi... leave me here."

"You're staying alone?"

He nodded.

"You'll die, Shion."

"I know," he whispered.

"You won't die painlessly," Nezumi said. "I don't know how many days you'll be like this for. It might be the dead of winter, but if these corpses are left out, they'll start to rot. You'll either go insane in the stench of decay, or you'll faint again and again from oxygen deficiency, and weaken that way, or..."

"Or... die on my own."

"Shion, don't take death lightly. If you underestimate it, it'll come back to bite you in the ass. Do you have some instantly effective poison on you, huh? How're you gonna kill yourself here, without a knife to slash your throat, without a rope to hang yourself? You can try biting your tongue, or jumping off of here, but you won't die easily."

"You've—got a knife," Shion said hoarsely.

Nezumi's shoulder twitched.

"So that's what you meant."

Shion was grabbed roughly by his hair. His head was flung back, and a knife was brought to his bared throat. He felt like the sharp blade would slice through his skin just from taking a deep breath.

"Are you asking me to kill you?" Nezumi hissed.

Shion inhaled silently. What would happen if he got his throat slit right here, by Nezumi's hand? Would his blood spurt forth, and colour Nezumi crimson?

"Shion." Nezumi's voice shook. "Are you trying to make me kill you?"

"Huh?"

"Don't 'huh' me. I'm asking you if you're trying to make me kill more people than I already have."

"Never—" Shion shook his head. Nezumi's fingers withdrew. "I would never want that. I'd hate for you to."

A long sigh. The aged female dog at Inukashi's used to sigh in a very similar way.

*My goodness. What are we ever going to do with you, child?*

"Look, think about it," Nezumi said tersely. "If I slash your throat, that's murder. If I give you the knife, I'm assisting your suicide. Either way, I'll have to take the blame for your death. Are you ordering me to take the brunt of it? And besides—"

Shion was grabbed by the hair, harder this time.

"Then what would you have memorized the layout of the Correctional Facility for? We're just starting to need your brain the most. I'm not gonna let you forfeit the match now. I won't allow it."

His hair was yanked mercilessly. The pain threw needles into his delirious consciousness.

"Without you, it'll be nearly impossible to escape from here. If you wanna die, I won't stop you. But do it after we get outta here. You understand what I'm saying, right?"

"Pretty well."

"Then listen. It's just starting. Got it, Shion? I need you."

"Yeah."

Shion willed his legs to stand. He could do it, but barely.

"Good boy."

"Yeah."

"Let's get going, then."

"Okay." Shion had no idea where they were going next, whether they were going to climb or descend. He didn't think of asking. He had no energy. He could only muster all the strength he could, and follow Nezumi. If he could be a necessary existence for him, then it was more attractive than dying in one stroke. To feel like this meant he still had the will to live. He still had... the will. So his soul hadn't completely withered away after all.

Nezumi whistled shortly. A clear, high note resounded in the darkness. After the sound died away, a silence fell. Even the dying people's groans were cut off.

*Chit.*

"Huh?"

*Cheep-cheep.*

A pair of small glowing dots appeared in the darkness. It was a colour Shion remembered.

"Hamlet?" It was the colour of the little mouse's eyes. They were the red stars at Shion's pillow as he got ready to go to bed; they were on top of the lofty pile of books; under his bed, always twinkling.

"It's not Cravat or Tsukiyo, is it...?"

"I told you not to give funny names to my mice," Nezumi said in annoyance. "And besides, what the hell would they be doing here?"

"You're right."

"But you're right about the mice part. It's a nameless mouse." Nezumi whistled again. This time, it was a melody. The red lights disappeared for a moment, and when Shion blinked again, they were right up close to him. Nezumi unwound a thin rope from his wrist. He tossed it lightly to the red lights.

"It's all yours."

*Cheep-cheep-cheep.* The mouse squeaked. The light was gone—the mouse had run off holding an end of the rope in its mouth.

"Oh—it's young."

"What'd you say?"

"The nameless mouse. It's younger than Hamlet and the rest, isn't it?"

"How can you tell? You couldn't even see the thing."

"Oh... well, I just had a feeling. Like it was still young."

After a few seconds of silence, he heard Nezumi click his tongue.

"Geez, your instincts seem to sharpen in the weirdest moments. I dunno if that makes you easy or hard to deal with."

"I only said what I felt."

"Hmph," Nezumi sniffed derisively, "talkative for someone who was about to give in a minute ago, huh? Means you've still got strength to spare."

"You said you needed me. So I'm gonna try my best."

"God, you sound like a kid. I only need your brain. Soon you'll have to run it full-throttle. Enjoy your holiday while you can. Here, take this."

Shion was handed a rope. He could see it was woven with a special fibre. It felt pliant and durable in his hands. Depending on how you used it, the special fibre could be used to sling and lift over a ton of weight, or cut cleanly through a single hair. The rope had been tied to something, for it was taut.

"Tie this rope to your waist. Tie it tight, and then you're gonna fly."

"Fly?"

"Yeah, You're gonna fly through the darkness like a nightbird. Have you tied it yet?"

"Yeah."

"Alright, we're gonna jump. Catch a breath." Shion was drawn closer, and he flew, half-carried by Nezumi, through the air. The darkness swayed all around him. He felt like he had become a pendulum. But his body soon hit a wall. He smelled dirt.

"Hold onto the rope with both hands. Don't dangle, get a foothold on the wall. Apply your rock-climbing skills, Shion."

"Sorry, I've never gone rock-climbing before." He told himself over and over to calm down. The smell of dirt that tickled his nostrils gave him courage. It wasn't blood, or vomit, or the stench of dying people. Shion inhaled a breath of air. Nezumi climbed up ahead of him, as if to show him by example.

"It's not much of a distance. Take your time on your way up. It's much easier than climbing a mountain of people."

"You can say that again," Shion replied. But it was daunting task to climb a wall that rose almost perpendicular from the ground. Shion felt like he was struggling fruitlessly.

"Did the little mouse come up this way?" he asked.

"They've got their own routes. You really love mice, don't you? Here, look, put your hand there, on the rock that's sticking out—yeah. Now here: there's a groove, right? Stay like that, and lift your body up."

Guided by Nezumi's precise instructions, Shion tackled the wall with all his concentration. It looked like Nezumi was only holding the rope with one hand. Sometimes he swayed unsteadily. The rope was probably not long enough for them both to tie around their waists.

*I'm much worse than a hindrance: I could be endangering Nezumi's life. That's how powerless I am.*

Shion was confronted with yet another reality.

*I'm powerless. But—*

*'I need you.'*

He tasted the words in his mouth thoroughly. They were like an aphrodisiac. He could feel it quenching his body. Shion dug his nails into the wall of dirt, and continued inching his way up.

His fingers touched something hard. The moment he noticed it, he felt himself being pulled up. When he fell face-forward, out of breath, he felt the same sensation of something hard on his cheek. It was also cold to the touch.

*Is it... rock?*

*Cheep-cheep-cheep!*

The lighthearted chirruping of little mice. He felt the small animals scurrying over his back. Cravat and the rest would often scurry across his back like this, in their bold demands for food or play.

Shion got up carefully. He cautiously tugged the rope bound around his waist. The other end was secured tightly to a protruding rock. It was a strange one; there was a round hole bored into the tip. The mouse had slipped through this hole several times to bind the rope tightly. Maybe it had been trained to do this. If it was, then was this rock also a man-made object, placed like a moor for a ship? He untied the rope, and coiled it around his arm.

He tried to hand the coil to Nezumi, but Nezumi didn't look up from where he was squatting on the floor. His breathing was laboured, despite how athletic he was. It was no surprise. He had looked out for Shion, given him instructions, and supported him throughout their climb here. It had probably taken many times the energy it would have cost him if he had climbed up by himself. Shion's heart ached.

"Nezumi—I'm sorry. I—"

"Don't apologize." His voice, a little hoarser than usual, cut Shion off. "You apologize for everything. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. What's apologizing gonna do to solve the problem? All it does is cut your delicate and injured conscience some slack."

"Yeah."

"Don't use words to excuse your guilt. Treat them with more respect."

"Okay." He was right. No matter how many tens of thousands of apologies he lined up, he wouldn't be able to solve a single thing. From now on, he would swallow the words that threatened to spill all too easily from his lips. Before speaking words of apology, he would silently bear the weight of his guilt.

He watched Nezumi's profile, whose lips were parted in laboured pants, making his shoulders rise and fall.

*Some day, I'll return the favour. You said you needed me. I'll live up to it. I'll put my life on the line to protect you.*

"Oh—Nezumi."

"Shut up. I told you to stop apologizing."

"No, I meant to say... I can see your face."

"Idiot. Took you long enough to notice, didn't it? From here on, we'll have a light. It's a small one, but still a light. A splendid gift, don't you think?"

Shion looked around him. The place they were in was slightly more spacious than a bed. The ground and walls were cobbled with stones of all sizes, and a number of them glowed with a white light.

"These are... LEDs..."

"Yeah. Light-emitting diodes. I'm guessing familiar lighting for a No. 6 resident? It



probably glows with a bit more flourish in No. 6, though."

"What are LEDs doing here—?" Shion said perplexedly. "The passage down there only had incandescent bulbs. Nezumi, this is inside the Correctional Facility, isn't it?"

"We haven't gotten inside yet, unfortunately."

"But—the wall we just climbed up was a natural one. It wasn't man-made."

"Oh, so you noticed?" Nezumi said with an impressed air.

"Even I could pick that up," Shion replied indignantly. "If it was man-made, I wouldn't have been able to climb it, even with your help. Either that, or it would have been much easier. But that wall was neither. It had handholds and footholds, but only just enough for me to manage the climb—not by myself, though."

"Are you still insulted that you couldn't climb up by yourself? Pretty sensitive, aren't you? Take injury to your pride easily?"

"My pride practically aches right now," Shion said. "Nezumi, what is this about? What is a natural cave doing directly connected to the basement of the Correctional Facility, an execution grounds?"

Nezumi stood up. A mouse had appeared on his shoulder without him noticing. It was grey and small. Its tail was a little longer than Cravat's.

"This place is a naturally-occurring series of caves, huge and complex. No. 6 decided to use part of it as its execution grounds. That's all there is to it."

"But these rocks aren't natural. This place is man-made too, isn't it? But it's completely different from the Correctional Facility. Which means it was made by the hands of someone else—"

Nezumi's hand reached toward him. Before he could utter anything, it clamped over his nose.

"You talk too much. Shut up and follow me."

"Okay. Right behind you."

"Shion, is your curiosity stirred just as easily as your pride? Your eyes are positively glowing."

Stir it certainly did. Curiosity thudded with a steady heartbeat inside Shion. What was there? Hell wasn't the only thing beyond this place. There was something else, a world different from the hideous inferno.

*What is it?*

*What's waiting?*

Nezumi slowly walked down a steeply slanted slope. His back floated dimly in the darkness.

A passage had been carved out of the boulders. The ceiling was low, and it was impossible to get through unless you crouched. Nezumi stopped once in a while to catch a deep breath, his shoulders sagging. He looked like he was having considerable difficulty.

Just as Shion opened his mouth to ask if he was alright, Nezumi swayed, and leaned heavily against the wall.

"Nezumi!"

He wondered if it was the same spell as last time. Nezumi would collapse suddenly, and lose consciousness. Shion thrust his hands out, expecting Nezumi to be overcome by the same

fit. But Nezumi didn't collapse. Still leaning against the wall, he only murmured:

"It's come again."

"Huh?"

"Never mind—"

"Can you walk?"

"Of course. I've got legs. And much better ones than yours at that."

Rejecting Shion's hand, Nezumi resumed his walk. Shion gave his hand, which had been dangling without anyone to accept it, a little shake, and moved forward as well.

"This is—"

He widened his eyes. They were, indeed, in the heart of a cavern. Rugged boulders protruded in some places, but it was considerably spacious. It was too dark to see into the corners. But it wasn't an inky darkness. Although dim, there were lights. But they did not come from light-emitting diodes.

"Candles?" There were a number of them lit in the crevices of the boulders. Shion had encountered these lights for the first time in the West Block.

"Nezumi, where—"

*Is this?* he had planned to finish, but the words stuck in his throat. Nezumi's profile was rigid. His throat slowly contracted as he swallowed. It was rare to see Nezumi so on-edge.

"Something wrong? What's—"

"Shion, get down!"

Just as Nezumi yelled, Shion felt himself get shoved. He fell backwards on his bottom. A black shadow whizzed past his nose.

*Scratch. Scratch.*

He heard a sound like rusty cogwheels turning. It was a voice.

Nezumi swung his hand. A black shadow bounced and splayed at Shion's feet.

"Whoa!" He bent over backwards. It was a grey rat, quite big. It looked like it had come from the sewers.

*Screech, screech, screech.*

One sewer rat after another attacked him. One leapt onto Shion's shoulder, opened its mouth wide, and attempted to sink its teeth into Shion's throat. He grabbed it and hurled it. The rat smelled dank. A dull pain raced through his arm next. There was a rat latching onto it. Shion's hands moved before he could feel fear.

"Damnit!" He battered his whole arm against the wall.

*Screech, screech.*

The rusty, creaking sounds echoed. The rats were crying out in alarm.

Countless red lights were winking at him. From crevices in the boulders all around, red eyes were looking down on Shion. He was being surrounded by several dozens of sewer rats. Their crimson gazes were directed unblinkingly at the two boys, as if they were waiting for the next opportunity to attack.

"Shion, you alright?"

"Of course."

"Just to let you know, imitating a cat isn't gonna scare these guys off."

"I figured as much. The cat would probably get scared off himself."

"That's some coarse welcome for someone they haven't seen in a while."

"Huh? In a while?"

Nezumi brought two fingers to his lips, and whistled. A variant melody, dancing high and low, flowed forth. It was a song Shion had never heard before. It made him think of a fog that drifted among a grove of trees in the dark. A black-and-white movie played in his mind.

*Scratch.*

A single sewer rat squeaked from somewhere nearby. It slowly approached them. Nezumi gently extended a hand forth, and the rat nuzzled his fingertips. Nezumi's fingers moved gently over its grey fur in a loving caress.

*Scratch, scratch, scratch.*

One more, then another, came down from the boulders. Nezumi's eyes flitted to Shion for a moment. Shion nodded deeply as a sign of assent. He crouched down, and extended his hand like Nezumi had done.

*Scratch.*

A slightly smaller rat rubbed against his hand. Shion scratched it between the ears.

Its red eyes narrowed. It was enjoying it.

*Hey, he's not much different from Cravat.*

The little mice used to love being petted between the ears as well. Every night before he went to sleep, they would always beg for it. Inukashi's dogs were the same. They were always ecstatic when he gave their fur a thorough brush.

"There there. There you go. Hey, wait. You want to be scratched too?" Shion looked down to notice several rats already sitting in his lap. They weren't as cute as the mice, of course. But they did not make him afraid. There was no trace of the aggression that they had showed before. More and more rats climbed into his lap, and it was starting to get heavy.

"Look at you," Nezumi said, cutting his whistling off to shake his head slightly, "you could give the Pied Piper a run for his money." Then he raised his chin, and glared into the air.

"Is this the last of your welcoming procession?" It was a voice that rang out clearly. Nezumi's beautiful voice echoed off the ceiling of boulders, and rang out still further. It was like he was on a stage with top-class acoustics.

"Show yourself. Your sewer rats aren't gonna do any good."

A small rock rolled across the ground. The darkness bristled in the crevices. As if to tear through it, a black mass came falling down. It alighted without a sound.

The sewer rats scattered from Shion's lap. In a blink of an eye, they melted out of sight into the darkness.

*Is it a human...?*

It looked like a human clad in a black cloak. When the cloak flapped to expose what was underneath, Shion stood up and held his breath.

A tall man of sturdy build was standing there. Everything about the man was grey. The long hair that reached down to his waist and the colour of his skin was grey. The colour of his eyes which stared back at him were grey. But they weren't a lustrous dark grey like Nezumi's. They were the colour of sand. Grey was also the colour of the desert. It rejected life, and accepted the lives of others none too easily. It nurtured nothing, and changed its shape with the wind. A vast and fruitless land. Whereas Shion felt a vital energy from Nezumi, this man

radiated an air of a barren world.

"What did you return for?" The man spoke, barely moving his lips. Shion felt a shiver run down his back, though he did not know why. He gripped his own arm tightly.

"You came back. That means you must die."

"Let me see Rou." Nezumi took half a step forward. "I have something important to discuss. Let me see him."

The man also took half a step forward. "You must die. Those are the rules."

He was the desert after all. There was no trace of life in him. Shion's chill got worse.

"You must die. Those are the rules." He felt an icy blast of wind coming from the man. Was it a hallucination?

Nezumi exhaled slowly. The darkness shifted above his head.

Shion couldn't catch the moment when the man moved, partly because it was dark. If they were immersed in inky darkness, the man's grey body may have been visible even just a little. But this dusky darkness, with only a candle as its source of light, allowed the man to blend easily into the background, and he was almost impossible to see with Shion's level of eyesight. But the man's movements would probably be difficult to follow even under the blazing sun of noon. He was that swift. His grey body glided and lunged at Nezumi. Nezumi rolled to the side barely a moment earlier. The man's leg followed him, swinging upwards in a kick, and Nezumi swatted it aside with his hand. The man only lost his balance slightly before regaining his posture and lunging at him soundlessly again.

A sewer rat clambered onto Shion's shoulder.

*Screech. Screech. Screech.*

It raised its voice shrilly, and rubbed its paws together. Whether it was merely spectating the fight between the two humans or cheering for one of them, Shion didn't know; but its voice was strangely excited.

"Can you see what's going on?"

*Screech-screech-screech.*

"You can see, huh. Nezumi—is Nezumi okay?" Shion squinted desperately into the dim gloom. He could only squint. He could only watch.

It was always like this. It had always been like this. *But—but I can't just let it end at that now. I have to do something—anything.*

The man had said Nezumi had to die. It wasn't mere intimidation. Although the man's voice had been emotionless and flat, it had been full of murderous intent. He was really intending to kill Nezumi.

*Screech-screech! Skrit-skrit-chit.*

The sewer rat leaned forward and squeaked in an even higher voice. Simultaneously, he heard the dull sound of flesh hitting flesh. Nezumi sprawled at Shion's feet.

"Nezumi!"

"Idiot! Don't come closer!" Nezumi curled up and coughed. He hauled himself up unsteadily.

"What's wrong?" The man asked from beyond the darkness, in the same flat voice. "Softened up a lot, haven't you, during all the time you've spent above ground?"

"Well, you might say I've—enjoyed my vacation a little—too much." He could hear

Nezumi gasping for air. Shion stepped forward.

"Fool. It's no wonder you can't fight me; you can barely even stand."

"Of course!" Shion was shouting. He wasn't able to make out the man clearly. But he could still hurl words at him. "How much strength do you think Nezumi had to use to even get here? Try doing the same, whoever the hell you are, before acting high and mighty. Try climbing that wall—with a burden like me in tow."

He was met with silence. The sewer rat on Shion's shoulder flicked its long tail lazily.

"What is he?"

"Just a burden," answered Nezumi.

"Why did you bring him here?"

"I want to introduce him to Rou."

"And then, what?"

"I want Rou to hear the story out."

"His story?"

"Mine."

"No one here will lend an ear to a fool like you, who's come crawling back and doesn't even know to hide his shame."

"You don't know until you try." Nezumi drew up softly beside Shion. It looked like Nezumi could see properly. For him, this dim light was enough.

"Shion, listen," Nezumi whispered at his ear. "The gap in the boulders right behind us. Narrow passage there. Jump into it. And run."

"And you?"

"Never mind me. Go!" Shion was shoved on his chest. He ran.

"Not so fast." The man's murderous intent bore down upon him like a shockwave. Nezumi spoke a short command.

'Go'... or was it 'run'?

Shion stopped and turned around. Two shadows were wrestling with each other. He could see a blurry image through the darkness. He could definitely see.

"Nezumi."

The man was straddling Nezumi, and had both hands around his throat. Nezumi was writhing to get free. Shion breathed fast and shallow.

*Nezumi is struggling?*

He had never seen Nezumi this trapped, struggling this hard.

*You must die.*

That was what the man had said. He had definitely said it.

Shion lifted his wrist. The rope of special fibre was wound around it. He wasn't thinking. His body had been cut away from his soul, his brain, and was moving on its own. No—maybe it was his soul commanding him.

*Kill him.*

The sewer rat leapt off Shion's shoulder. It darted into the gap between the boulders that Nezumi had told him to jump into. Shion didn't follow it. He was going to turn his back on Nezumi's words.

*Scree-scree-scree.*

The sewer rats screeched in every direction from their rocky perches. Their voices were wrung in apprehension and fear. The man's movements froze. His gaze scoured the area. His chin jerked upwards just slightly.

Shion leapt onto the man's back. He hooked the rope under the man's chin, crossed it, and leaned backwards with all his weight.

*Gah!*

The man writhed. Shion dug a foot into his shoulder, and tightened the noose as far as it would go. Back when he had tried to strangle the wretched man in the room adjacent to the execution grounds, he had only had a vague notion of what he was doing, and his thought processes had been mostly numbed. But it was different now. He was completely alert. His conscious was crisp and clear. His intentions and thoughts were his own.

*I'll kill him.*

*If you try to kill Nezumi, then you must be destroyed. You are destined to be destroyed.*

He pulled tighter.

The man's body bent back like a bow.

"Shion!" A yell resounded. It was a scream. A strangled voice called his name.

"Shion! Stop—stop, please—" Nezumi pounced on him from behind. "Stop, I'm begging you. Shion."

"Huh—?"

A pair of hands cupped his face firmly.

"Can you hear my voice?"

"Oh—yeah."

"Let go. Hurry. Loosen your grip."

He did what he was told. The man rolled over, and tried unsuccessfully to get up. He remained on his knees, coughing heavily. The air whistled through his half-collapsed throat like a wind that whistled through a wasteland.

"Shion—I told you before. You're not made out to be an executioner." Nezumi picked up the rope, and gripped it in his hand. His lip was cut and painted with his blood. The pair of red lips moved. "—or are you saying this is salvation?"

"No."

"Then what? If you were trying to save me, it was none of your business. Shion, don't ever pull a ridiculous stunt like this again. This isn't something for you to do."

"It's punishment."

"What?"

"This is punishment."

"Punishment—what do you mean?"

"That man tried to kill you. So he paid the penalty."

"Shion, you—"

"I'll do the same thing again. If that man tries to kill you, I'll do the exact same thing."

The man sat squatting on the ground, still wheezing, clutching his throat.

"Who—is he?"

This time, Nezumi didn't answer. He looked down at Shion silently. His fingers which held the rope were trembling.

"He choked me," the man said in disbelief. "And I didn't—I, out of all people—I didn't notice his presence."

"Yeah—you sure didn't."

"I was choked from behind, and I couldn't escape."

"Yeah. You were flailing about like a rabbit in a trap."

"The rats were afraid of his presence."

"Yup."

The man shuddered. "Who... is he?"

"He's a resident of No. 6."

"No. 6? —What is a resident of No. 6 doing here?"

Nezumi exhaled shortly. "Let me speak to Rou. I'll tell him everything."

Shion sat listening to Nezumi and the man converse. His palms finally began to throb in pain, from where the rope had dug in.

"Let us hear your story."

A voice rained down from above their heads.

Shion raised his face and looked around. There was a dark painted space in the darkness where even the light of the candles didn't reach. The voice was coming down from there. Just a sentence—

*Let us hear your story.*

With those words, it disappeared. There was no human presence there.

"Much obliged," Nezumi sighed. The man stood up. He staggered and disappeared between the boulders.

"Let's go then, Shion."

"Oh—right." He stepped out into the darkness.

"Shion."

"Hm?"

"It's probably useless to say this, but—"

"Mm-hmm."

"I want you to stay as you are, Shion."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"The Shion I know would never commit a sin. Never." *Fight it*, Nezumi murmured. "I want you to fight with yourself."

It was a plea. His tone was strained and imploring. Wasn't this the tone of voice that Nezumi himself despised the most?

Shion closed his eyes.

Behind his eyelids, there was a darkness even deeper than the one that spread before his eyes.

## Afterword

This *No. 6* series has finally reached its fifth volume. I still remember complaining in Volume 1 how I was ashamed of myself for turning my afterwords into excuses, and saying '*I don't want to write them anymore!*'. But after thinking it over calmly again, I realized that it wasn't the *afterwords* I didn't like; it was me—making excuses, justifying myself with this or that—that I disliked. So basically, I'd been taking my frustrations out on the afterword itself. I must confess, that's not getting to the root of the problem at all. I'm sick of it, really.

These days I really think that people like me—who are skilled in the art of self-preservation, are cowardly, but also ambitious—shouldn't be writing a story like *No. 6*. I may have written a bit about this somewhere else, but *No. 6* to me as a work was something a little out of the ordinary. To me, the core of a work was always in humans. I wanted to write about, and know more about, none other than people. The only device I had at my hands that would let me understand people was writing. I wanted to know these girls, these boys, these men and women. I wanted to know what kind of people they were. That was the energy behind why I wanted to start writing, and it was the reason I kept writing.

But before I started writing the story of *No. 6*, I wished to know the world before I started getting to know the people. I hoped for a story that would help me face the world I was living in now. It was my first experience. That was why at first, I was not so much interested in the true form of Shion, or Nezumi—what they thought, what they loved, what they loathed as they lived their lives. The Holy City was the protagonist of this story, and the boys were only side characters. But it wasn't long before those arrogant thoughts were shattered to pieces. But of course: it was impossible to render a world in which humans were neglected a place. People are always connected to the world. People are what comprise the world itself. The world is created by people, who make it bountiful, who make it corrupt, who destroy it, and bring it back to life.

Before I knew it, I was the one desperately following Shion and Nezumi, enchanted by the world they created, the changes they underwent, and their fates. And though it took long enough, it finally hit home for me that the only way to render this world was to follow them, watch them, grasp them, and pen them. It was a reckless challenge. I feel like a praying mantis brandishing its tiny claws at an enormous oncoming cart.<sup>2</sup> I don't have that resolve. I don't have the guts to face the world, or my own self head-on. That was also what I realized while writing this story. And as soon as I realized it, it hurt to hear Nezumi's words and feel Shion's gaze. So now we've come to this: whatever shall I do? I wish I could just throw it away.... Oh dear me, now instead of excuses I'm griping. Hmm, not good. But I'll hang in there for a little more. If I don't pull myself up by my bootstraps now, I wouldn't know what I'd written this far for; so on and so forth, blah blah.

Thank you for supporting me and putting up patiently with my reckless challenges and weak-willed excuses: Mr. Harada Hiroshi from the Bunko Publishing Department; Mr. Yamashiro Hideyuki from the Children's Publishing Department. And my heartfelt thanks to

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2 A Japanese idiom; one who enters danger heedless of one's own weaknesses. (*tōrō no ono*; 螳螂の斧)



you, reader, who has taken the time to read this work.

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Asano Atsuko